



I Will Find You by **darthstormer**

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Summary: El destroyed the demogorgon, but in doing so, closed the gate behind her. As time passed, everyone seemed to move on, but not Mike Wheeler. He knows she's still out there, trapped in that terrible place, and he will stop at nothing to bring her home. Post S1 - The Long Search AU

1. Chapter 1

Mike Wheeler sat in the back of the classroom, slumped against the cabinets. The weight of an invisible hand held him pinned in place, doing everything in its power to keep him out of harms way. He could practically feel the anguished determination flowing through her as she faced off against the creature once and for all. At the front of the classroom, Eleven stared hard at the demogorgon, hatred and guilt fighting for control in her mind. Tears burned in Mike's eyes as he knew what would come next. The look of determination on her face told it all; she would do anything to protect her friends. With tears of her own, she turned for one last look at the boy who had come to mean everything to her in just a few short days.

"Goodbye, Mike," she whispered sadly, before turning again to face her foe, snarling in rage against her forceful grip.

Bending her head low, she glared with eyes burning red. "No more," she declared with all the resolve she had left in her.

In agony, Mike's tears began to fall freely as he watched her reach forth with every ounce of her strength and began to tear at the very fabric of the creature. The low growl in Eleven's throat grew into a fevered scream of primal rage as she ripped the molecules of the creature apart in a growing cloud of black that surrounded them.

In a sudden final burst, the lights in the room blazed, went dead, and flickered back to life and his worst fears were confirmed; they were gone, the demogorgon and Eleven both. Refusing to believe what his eyes were telling him, Mike raced numbly to the front of the room, to the spot where she had stood only seconds before.

"El?" he shouted, hoping beyond hope she was still there, somehow. "El, where are you?" The tears poured down his face unchecked as his eyes frantically searched every corner of the classroom.

"Eleven!?"

Mike Wheeler's eyes snapped open in the darkness, the last of a scream still caught in his throat. The nightmare wasn't a new one; he

had been dreaming the same dream nearly every night for years now. It was his constant companion and he knew every detail inside out and front to back. It was also the only thing he had left of her. The night she tore the demogorgon out of this world, she had somehow pulled the gateway closed behind her; Hopper and Joyce had barely brought Will back through the rift in the lab when it sealed up solid behind them.

He lay there in the silence of the night, slowing his breathing and letting his pulse return to normal. Finally, knowing sleep wouldn't be back to offer him any further escape, he rolled over and looked at the clock on his bedside, squinting his eyes against the glow of the bright-green numbers. 4:36 AM. The dream had come later than usual. With a resigned sigh, he brought both hands to his face and wiped the rest of sleep from his eyes and sat up, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. As he sat there, he tried to push the dream into the back of his mind, safely tucked away so he could go about his day. For some reason, today, the dream stubbornly refused to go back on its shelf.

He looked over at his desk in the corner of the room and knew what he needed to do. Sliding his feet in the slippers waiting right where he had left them the night before, Mike walked over and sat down, switching on the desk lamp and squinting against the harsh light, allowing his eyes to adjust. Looking down at the desk calendar, he read today's date and the number hand-written below and his stomach gave an involuntary twist of guilt. Reaching across the desk, he switched on the radio base-station and double checked it was set to channel 11. He knew, of course, that it would be; he hadn't switched it off that channel since he bought it surplus years ago when the local quarry went out of business. The unit was old, but had a much stronger signal than his old SuperComm. He took a deep breath, and started in.

"Good Morning El. It's me. Today is day 7397. I had the dream again and now I can't get back to sleep."

He paused, gathering his thoughts. Somewhere in his mind, a dark, hopeless voice always told him the calls were pointless. On the astronomically low chance she was even still out there, the odds were even lower that she was reaching out to listen to him at this very

moment. He had spent years trying to shut the voice up, usually drinking it into silent submission, though he and the booze had come to something of an understanding in more recent years. Still, he did his best to force the voice to be quiet, especially when he was reaching out to her.

"I...I miss you El. I really miss you. And I'm sorry I haven't been able to get to you. Wi...Our friend...keeps telling me I can't keep blaming myself for every setback, but I can't help it. I know I'm failing you, leaving you stranded there. Wherever you are, I hope you're safe. Please hold on. I know I'm getting close, I have to be. Please, just hold on."

He released the switch on the microphone, before pressing it down again and adding, "I love you El. Please hold on."

Mike hung the microphone back on its hook, turned the volume all the way up, the squelch all the way down, and let his bedroom fill with the garbled hum of static. It was a routine - like everything else in his life - listening closely to the static, desperate to pick out the slightest sign that she might be there trying to contact him. A few times over the years, he had been certain he heard his own name drift in through the static, but Will had dissuaded him of that; the human brain loves to build patterns out of randomness, especially when it is desperate to find something.

When he couldn't stand the crackling silence, he switched off the radio and made his way down to the kitchen to start a pot of coffee. Despite feeling like crawling right back in bed and shutting the world off, it was Friday and that meant he had a class to teach at 9:00. In a pinch, he could have his TA lead the class; after all, he thought, today's plans are just a review for the midterm exam on Monday. Still, Mike knew he had enough mysterious absences that the department was keeping a closer eye on him. Keeping the university happy was vital to continuing his search.

Pouring a tall mug of coffee and stirring in a generous heap of powdered creamer, Mike walked out his back door and across the lawn to his garden-shed-turned-workshop. As he flipped on the light and closed the door behind him, he was greeted by the usual clicks and hums of his rigs testing out their appointed addresses. Spread out

across his workbench were the innards of a pressurized test-rig that had met an untimely end yesterday when a massive influx of heat fried the primary sensors in seconds. Thankfully, the fail-safes had kicked in and severed the connection before anything catastrophic occurred.

He looked over at the printer and was pleased to see three pages waiting for him. It was always a miracle to find just one after a night of searching, so three managed to pull him out of the dismal mood of the morning. Settling into his chair, he took a sip of coffee and looked over the first page. It was pretty easy to dismiss, the whole image was underwater and a fish was even swimming passed the camera. He jotted a note to himself; that should have never made it past the atmospheric sensors. Number two was at least on dry land, but there was bright sunshine and no signs of human presence. He added the printout to the first to be cataloged later; it was still a significant find, just not what he was looking for.

Grabbing the third page, he raised the coffee to his lips for another sip. Scanning down the readouts and photos, he froze and almost dropped the mug. A match! He had found a match. It wasn't the first time, not even close, and he did his best to hold his excitement in check, but it was a match all the same. Looking down the printout, it was a very promising lead: breathable atmosphere, survivable temperature, very dark, just a hint of purple in the sky. What intrigued him most was the appearance of his neighbor's house in the photo. He knew the Upside-Down was supposed to look just like the real world, only decayed. Buildings, roads, cars; they were all present, just with an abandoned feel.

Mike swung the chair around to his computer and switched one of the camera rigs to manual mode and looked back at the printout, typing in the address printed in bold at the top: 62M-291K-042.0H. Behind him, the rig whirred to life and established a connection, before sending through the camera, ready to transmit live images back the monitor where Mike stared intently with anticipation. Seconds later, the first images began to appear and his excitement grew. There was his neighbors house, covered in thick black vines. He panned the camera around, taking in the full scene on the other end of the connection. He recognized his own house, equally decayed

and abandoned. Then an image of the workshop itself, one wall collapsed in on itself. It was all Mike could do to stay in his seat. He had found a solid match. It was easily the most complete match he had found in the last two years and he knew he had to follow it immediately.

As he left the workshop, he put the rigs back in automatic mode, to continue identifying further candidates on the off-chance this one didn't pan out. Stopping in the kitchen, he grabbed the phone off the wall and called the TA for his class.

"Chris? It's Professor Wheeler. Can you handle leading the class this morning? It's just a review for the exam Monday. ... You can? ... Excellent, thanks. You are a life saver. The outline is sitting on my desk, I'll make sure Marge has it waiting for you at the front desk when you get to campus."

That done, he held down the switch on the phone for second, before releasing it and dialing Marge Collins, the department secretary. As expected, she wasn't in yet, so he left a quick voice-mail for her.

"Marge, it's Mike. I'm going to need to take a sick day today. I've already talked to Chris and he is going to cover my 9:00. On my desk is the outline for today's review, could you grab that and have it for him when he stops by? Thanks a million, I owe you."

Settling the phone back into its cradle, Mike raced upstairs to throw on some clothes. He came back down a few minutes later in khaki canvas pants, a gray t-shirt and hiking boots. He grabbed a well-worn brown leather jacket from the closet and pulled a set of keys from the hook next to the door into the garage. On a normal day, he would be driving his modest Honda Civic to campus, but today was a special day - a journey day - and he wasn't headed to campus. After hitting the button mounted on the wall to open the garage door, he slid behind the wheel of his black 1962 Willys CJ-5 Jeep.

As he drove through town, Mike fought to keep his foot from slamming too hard on the gas. The last thing he needed on a morning like this was a speeding ticket. Twenty minutes later, he pulled the Jeep into his university-funded lab in the Indianapolis Sunrise Industrial Park. It was unorthodox for a professor to keep an off-

campus workspace, but he had provided the university just enough research results to get a special exemption, citing a need for a stronger electrical supply than the university could provide. Closing the large loading door behind him, Mike quickly gathered the supplies into the Jeep that he always kept at the ready. Walking over to the computer terminal, Mike dialed in the address where he was hopeful he was finally going to find Eleven. He watched in silence as the computer took control and called up the gateway he had requested. A shimmering red disk appeared just above the lab floor, surrounded by the lattice of wires and framing that had called it forth. Seconds later, the disk was struck with a burst of radio waves, finely tuned to his desired frequency, and the surface went translucent.

Trying his best to hold his excitement in check, Mike sent a mandatory email to Will. Of the original Party, Will was the only one still around and supporting Mike's search, and was helping in any way he could.

Will,

Checking out a lead.

62M-291K-042.0H. Out 2/13/04 08:30. Expect return by 2/15/04 18:00.

Wish me luck.

Mike

That sent, Mike grabbed his hat from a peg on the wall and started back to the Jeep, catching his own reflection in the windshield as he walked. Will was right, he did look like he was trying to be Indiana Jones. Still, university professor / adventurer was a pretty accurate description of Mike Wheeler, so maybe the look was justified.

Mike climbed behind the wheel and turned the ignition, the Jeep roaring to life. "Hang on, El. I'm coming to bring you home." he whispered to himself as he drove toward the portal. As the Jeep passed through the glowing red disk, it disappeared from the lab, materializing again in what Mike hoped was the Upside-Down where

Eleven, the girl he loved, had been waiting for him for more than twenty years.

AN: This story has been a labor of love and an arch-nemesis of mine for almost a year now. I had a good idea of how it should all play out when I started releasing related one-shots in *The Long Search*, but starting to write Mike's story became something of a struggle in places. It has caused a lot of inner reflection, and been through more reworkings than I care to recall. On top of life, work and family, I have tried to push forward, while going back and tweaking what never quite felt right.

I've come to the point that I have enough written to be confident in the direction and outcome, and I either need to bite the bullet and send my words out into the world, or I need to put the story to rest. And so Dear Readers, I present Mike Wheeler's long search.

2. Chapter 2

Arriving in what he hoped was finally the Upside-Down, Mike pulled the Jeep to a stop and climbed out. Behind him, the portal stood a shimmering, translucent red, and beyond that, his own world. Grabbing a remote from the Jeep, he aimed it at the dimensional rift and pressed a button. Moments later, the signal having been received by the computers on the other side, the opening shrank down to a point not much larger than a pencil. The risk was small, but he knew he had to prevent any wildlife from accidentally finding their way through to the other side. To his knowledge, it had only ever happened once when the late Dr. Brenner sent Eleven off in search of the demogorgon in the first place, but the results had been disastrous and he had no wish to make the same careless mistake.

Turning his attention to the loading door in this version of his lab, he was pleased to find the opening already rotted away, the panels sitting in a crumbled heap on the ground. It took a few minutes, but he dragged enough of the pile out of the way to allow the Jeep through. Wrapping a bandanna around his mouth to keep out the bigger chunks of white spores hanging in the air, and pulling an old pair of machinist's goggles down over his eyes, Mike climbed back behind the wheel and set out.

The road seemed to be in good enough condition, and few cars were strewn about. Even in his own world, it was a couple hours between his lab in Indianapolis and Hawkins. He had debated with himself, more than once, about whether he should setup another lab in his old hometown, but the risk was too great. Close to the university, it was easy to cover his true work. The same couldn't be said in Hawkins and it wouldn't take long for people to start asking questions he wasn't prepared to answer. It still amazed him he had managed to keep things under wraps as long as he had.

By his best guess, Hawkins was probably five hours away in this world, giving him plenty of time to think. He desperately wished the Jeep had a radio, but of course there was no one on this side to be broadcasting anything. Besides that, Upside-Down-like worlds chewed through electronics in almost no time at all. It was a lesson

he had learned the hard way years before. He had been taking a mid-90s pickup truck through the gate in those days. On one particularly harsh world, he had stopped for the night to rest after searching Hawkins for a full day. The next morning, the corrosive effects of the world had eaten away at the truck's electronic control systems to the point he couldn't even get the engine to turn over. Eventually, he was forced to abandon it to that world and make the trek back to Indianapolis on foot. It had taken nearly a week to make the trek and it gave him plenty of time to plan for how not to have to make that journey again.

Safely home, after being thoroughly chewed out by Will, they set about laying down plans for leaving word when he went out, when he planned to be back, and rules about what was to be done if he didn't make it home. He also bought a vehicle that would better stand up to the harsh realities of the worlds he was searching. While he would have preferred the military edition, he was happy enough with the classic civilian Jeep. Its engine was built to withstand harsh environments, the air filter could be cleaned by hand during a pit-stop and there were virtually no electronics to go bad. It was also well suited to repairs in the field should something break down.

With nothing but the droning of the engine, Mike let his mind wander down a path all too familiar. He knew he should be proud of his machine; he had accomplished in a few short years what the greatest minds of science had only speculated at. Of course, he had been favored with two distinct advantages over others who sought to gain access to worlds beyond their own. First, he knew the destination was real and what forms it would take. Second and infinitely more important, he had lost something more precious to him than life itself on the other side of that great divide, and this was the only way to bring her back. He could certainly appreciate the magnitude of all he had achieved, but would gladly hand it over and live a life in total obscurity if it meant she came back to him.

In spite of a starting point and a clear goal, the machine had by no means been an easy thing to construct. The idea had nagged at the back of his mind through that whole first year as he waited in desperation for her to find her way home again. As day 365 arrived, he finally resolved himself to what he had to do. As he called out to

her that night, hoping she could find him in the void, he made her a solemn promise.

"Since you can't get back to me, I'm coming to get you. I have no idea how I'm going to find you, or how to get there. I have no idea how long it might take, but I'm coming to get you, El. Please don't give up on me; I promise I won't ever give up on you. I'm coming and I'm going to bring you home. You're the strongest person I've ever known, I hope you can be strong for just a little longer. I'm coming."

He had thought a lot about what Mr. Clarke said the day of Will's funeral, about how opening the gate would take more energy than mankind knew how to generate. While El was capable of truly remarkable things, she was still human. He was quite certain she was easily the most singularly amazing human to ever have lived, but she was human all the same, and that meant whatever forces she was able to generate and manipulate were still possible to bring into reality. He had started his hunt in the library, diving head first into anything he could find that seemed even remotely related; neuroscience, electrical engineering, theoretical physics. A good deal of it went over his head at the time, but piece by piece he started to form a picture of how she might have torn open a hole between their world and the Upside-Down. After quickly exhausting everything the Hawkins public library had to offer, he started bribing Nancy to drive him into Indianapolis to lose himself in the university libraries and their vast offerings.

As helpful as the books proved, Mike knew the most valuable source of information was sitting in the now shuttered Department of Energy lab on the outskirts of town. After Nancy and Jonathan helped expose the lab's wrongdoings, the government had stepped in and closed up shop with lightning speed. Anything deemed replaceable or of no future value was stacked away in the countless labs and offices and the doors were chained shut. He had been a little careless with the bolt-cutters the first time he snuck into the deserted building and was promptly delivered home by military police and made to promise he wouldn't go back. After that, he was much more careful and managed to evade detection as he set to work digging through the mountains of paperwork left behind. In time, he managed to find the boxes that contained every note, test result and monitor readout the late Dr.

Brenner had gathered on Eleven. As he read through page after page of the details of her short, tortured life, he had felt physically sick on more than one occasion. Often an afternoon of reading had ended with him curled up on her old, tiny bed in tears. Once, he had been moved to anger and found himself in the basement with a length of steel pipe shattering what remained of the sensory-deprivation "bathtub" where Brenner had sent a terrified girl out in search of monsters. Still, as he read through the details in the files, he was further confirmed in his belief of just how amazing she was. While ordinary brains dealt with a few simple, low frequency waves, hers was capable of dozens of additional types of waveforms, unique just to her and capable of interacting with and manipulating the world around her.

He had pretty much taken over the basement of the Wheeler house, turning it into his own lab and workspace. His mom didn't ask many questions and simply left him to his business, half jokingly ordering him to not blow up the house. His dad took little notice and never even bothered venturing down to the basement. Finally, it all came together on May 6, 1987; day 1270. After countless setbacks, miscalculations, dead-ends and one small fire, he tried once again to start up his construction. With a deep hum, multiple rotating fields of high-energy waves spun an intricate pattern of magnetic fields that coalesced into the very gateway he had been searching for. Before him, suspended weightlessly within the metal latticework he had constructed was a red disk, like thick red plastic with a shimmering surface that seemed almost alive as he stared into its depths. With more than a little apprehension, Mike approached the disk and reached out a hand, placing it on the cold surface. Where he had expected to find an opening that gave way to his touch, he was instead met with solid resistance.

Fighting to keep his disappointment at bay, Mike spent the next month trying desperately to make headway through this new barrier. He succeeded in determining the finer points of crafting the disk; he could bring it into existence, make it expand tall enough to step through or shrink it down to the size of a pencil point, and then deconstruct it entirely. In spite of all this, he could not make the disk actually open and yield to his touch. He had poured over the lab's notes countless times and reconstructed the events and conditions of

the day she first opened the gate, but still nothing happened. Finally, on day 1309, he reached his wits end. It was a warm Sunday afternoon and he had spent almost an hour standing in front of a large red disk, just staring deep into its sparkling surface. It almost felt as though the portal were mocking him and waving the last piece of the puzzle just out of his reach. Finally, in desperation, Mike stormed out of the basement and around to the back of the house to the firewood pile and grabbed the ax his dad kept there. Back in the basement, Mike firmed his grip on the handle and swung at the disk with all his might, intending to shatter its unyielding face. Instead, the ax-head bounced off the surface with so much force it almost broke his wrist. As it struck, the impact managed to set the whole disk vibrating like an enormous gong. As he watched in fascination, the face of the disk took on a translucent appearance, like the surface of a still pond.

Tentatively, Mike stepped forward and placed a hand on the disk. Where before it had only met with firm resistance, his hand now sank straight through the surface. He pulled it back in alarm and found his hand was unharmed. Ducking his head around to inspect the back of the disk, he placed his hand through again, and where he would have expected it to pass through the thin disk and emerge on the other side, it instead simply disappeared into some other place entirely.

He had done it! He had found his way though. With little thought to what could be waiting on the other side, Mike grabbed the ax and approached the portal.

"I'm coming El," he announced, and stepped through the opening, vanishing from his basement.

3. Chapter 3

Mike Wheeler stepped out of the portal and planted his feet firmly on the ground of a new world. He was one of only a handful of people who could claim the distinction of traveling to another dimension, though it irked him just a little that he was the second Wheeler child to do so. He turned a slow circle, taking in his surroundings and knew immediately something was wrong.

In addition to all his research about Eleven's abilities and the original portal, Mike had also tried to learn everything he could about the world waiting for him on the other side. To that end, he had grilled the people who had actually experienced it for every detail they could remember. Nancy had relayed what she could, though her time in the Upside-Down had lasted only a few minutes out in the woods. Joyce Byers had been reluctant to dredge back up the memories and even then, they had been disjointed recollections. Her whole focus that night had been finding Will. Chief Hopper had provided a detailed picture of the world thanks to his naturally observant nature, though it had taken a lot of work to drag it out of him as he had begun to withdraw from the world after the events of that Fall. Will had provided by far the most complete account of the world, having spent almost a full week there. It had taken many conversations to get the details and Mike hadn't pushed, reluctant to make his best friend relive that horrible place. Still, Will had been eager from the beginning to help Mike in any way he could.

Looking around, Mike knew at once that he was not standing in the Upside-Down. That world was a dark and decaying reflection of the real world and he was certain he should have been standing in a bleak version of his own basement. Instead, Mike found himself standing partway up the side of a small wooded slope. He turned slowly again, trying to work out just where he was. Suddenly it hit him; he was exactly where his basement would be if the ground had been dug away for a foundation. He was still in Hawkins, or rather a version of Hawkins where the town was never built. The second clue was the darkness and decay, and more specifically, the lack of it. It was a warm, sunny day with a breeze softly rustling in the trees. Though he couldn't be positive that things didn't change during

different times of the year, in all the descriptions of the Upside-Down, there had been no light beyond a pale blue glow in the sky and the air had been cold and full of flaky spores.

With a sinking sense of dread, Mike let the realization wash over him that this was not the realm where Eleven was waiting for him. Walking up the hill, he stopped in what should have been the street in front of his house.

"El!" he shouted, cupping his hands around his mouth in an attempt to carry his voice further. "Eleven, are you there?"

He paused, listening intently to the breeze and trying to ignore the sound of his own heartbeat hammering in his ears. No voice answered his call.

"Eleven!" he called again, desperate for a response and knowing full well that one wasn't coming.

His mind tumbled over itself, trying to make sense of the situation. He had succeeded in opening a portal to another dimension. El had been trapped in another dimension. "She has to be here, she just has to be," he told himself.

Not ready to give up, he set off walking. At first, he struck out with no particular destination in mind, but soon enough he settled on a route that would take him around to the places he had gone with her during their week together. It stood to reason that she would seek out someplace familiar to establish some kind of shelter while she waited. He started with Will's house and Castle Byers, or at least the places they should have been. Finding those locations equally devoid of any signs of human life or structures left him further disheartened. The Upside-Down had definitely had a copy of Castle Byers, since that was where Will had hidden for much of the week. Refusing to despair he continued on his circuit through town, checking for signs first at the lab and much later, at the site of Hawkins Middle School.

Several times, as he crossed through town, Mike came across worn dirt trails, though he couldn't tell one way or the other if they were made by humans or animals as he saw neither. Twice, he was certain he heard the sounds of footsteps following him but both times, upon

stopping and quickly checking behind, he was all alone. Everywhere he checked held no signs to give him any hope this was the right world. Finally, as the sun began to sink low in the sky, he made his way back to the portal which was, thankfully, still hanging in the air right where he had first come through. After calling to her one more time, Mike resolved that this was not the world where he would find Eleven.

Stepping back into his own basement, Mike shut down the portal and flopped down on the couch, too exhausted to think. Sitting there, he felt as though a giant weight was pulling him underwater. This wasn't how it was supposed to have gone. He was supposed to fire up the portal, step through into the Upside-Down and bring her home. Instead, he had found himself in a different world entirely. That meant Mr. Clarke had been right all those years before, after Will's funeral: he was dealing with the many-worlds theory. That meant he had a near-infinite possible set of worlds where she could be waiting for him. Standing from the couch, Mike took two steps toward the stairs before thinking better of it. Instead, he looked over at the blanket fort he had built her that first night when he brought her in out of the rain. He had been keeping it up in her memory, though he had every intention of living up to his promise and giving her his room once she was home and safe. Climbing in among the carefully folded blankets, Mike hugged her pillow tight to his chest and lay down. Moments later, tears began to roll silently down his cheeks.

"I'm sorry El," he whispered through ragged breaths. "I won't give up. I promise."

The next morning, Mike woke up tangled among the blankets lining the floor of the fort. Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, he stretched and wandered over to controls of the machine. Hitting the big green startup button on the control panel, the device quickly ran through its routine and called forth a fresh red disk, as tauntingly solid as ever. He placed his hand on the cold surface and confirmed it had no intention of yielding to his touch and ushering him into another dimension. He thought back to yesterday when it had opened up at the slam of an ax. He didn't think it had somehow broken the surface, as Mike had spent countless hours in the last month stabbing at the surface with screwdrivers and knives; anything sharp he could find.

At one point he had even contemplated taking a shot at it with the revolver he knew Nancy still had tucked away in the back of her closet, but rejected the idea just as quickly since that would probably draw more than a little notice to what he was doing in the basement.

Picking up the heavy implement again, he swung the blunt side of the ax-head at the disk and struck with a solid thud. Just as it had done the previous day, the solid surface turned translucent and the doorway was open again. Poking his head through the rift, he confirmed it appeared to have taken him back to the same world as before. Mike quickly shut down the portal and called up a new one. Again and again, he struck the surface, setting the whole disk vibrating and the doorway opened at his command. Theorizing it might have something to do with the way the disk was vibrating, he tried constructing a larger disk. When struck, it vibrated with a slower ripple across its surface. As the face went translucent, a pile of soft yellow sand poured through. Stepping cautiously through, Mike was startled to find the opening half-buried in a sand-dune. The Hawkins of this world stood in the middle of a barren desert. Hot sun beat down on dunes that stretched as far as the eye could see in every direction. There were no signs of water, no plants or animals, no life of any kind. Mike stepped back through into the cool safety of his basement and dismissed the portal before any more sand could find its way through.

As the summer drug on, Mike worked out the finer points of dialing the portal with repeatable accuracy. The frequency he got the disk vibrating directly controlled what dimension he found on the other side. Oscillations as slow as 10 hertz resulted in worlds to visit and every half-hertz change resulted in another place Eleven could be stranded. Each world was carefully documented with its dialing frequency and a description in the same dog-eared journals where he had tracked the development of the machine from the day he promised Eleven he would come for her. He had quickly found that the disks could be set into motion by electromagnetic waves or direct force. In the case of smaller, thinner disks, the portals could even be set off by vocal waves as he found one day when he slammed his toe firmly into the foot of his workbench and swore loudly near one that was waiting to be dialed. The world described in his journal under the crude title of "Fuck!" consisted of a chain of small islands,

populated by colorful birds and thin, tall trees. It was actually kind of pretty, and he thought maybe someday it would be a pleasant place to come back and visit with a kayak. But that would be later, when El was home. For now, there was no time and much more important things to be done.

That summer he also discovered just how lucky he had been with the first few worlds he had visited. On the fifth world he tried, the portal resolved and immediately a violent wind started pulling everything in the room toward the opening. Slamming his hand quickly on the red shutdown button, the connection was broken and the basement was left in still silence. Only later did he come to find there were many dimensions where planet Earth simply didn't exist and so, the portal resolved in the vacuum of space. After that, he dialed each portal as a tiny opening first until he could verify there was actually a stable world on the other end.

Onward through the summer, he refined the process of dialing new worlds, jumping higher in frequency to determine if there was an upper limit. With the setup in his basement, his capabilities topped out around two million Hertz but there was nothing to make him think that was the actual upper limit of possibilities. Still, that left him with nearly four million worlds where she could potentially be waiting patiently for him to bring her home.

Knowing he was in it for the long haul, and refusing to give up, Mike settled into the search. Every free moment was spent in the basement, dialing up portals in sequence, cataloging what he found and searching worlds that even remotely matched the description of the Upside-Down. After almost a year of searching manually, he built several automated rigs that could test for the presence of a world where she could potentially be alive, for him to then search in more detail. Thanks to the rigs, he had tested nearly eight million possible worlds and set foot in more 500 himself. Many had been dismissed almost as soon as he stepped through, but a significant number had been a strong enough match to warrant exploring. And that was how, on Valentine's Day Eve, he found himself in yet another potential Upside-Down, at a frequency of 62 Megahertz, 291 Kilohertz, 42.0 Hertz: 62M-291K042.0H. She would be here. He could feel it. She had to be.

4. Chapter 4

As Mike arrived on the outskirts of Hawkins, he pulled off to the side of the road and shut off the engine. Though this world was new to him, the spot he chose was familiar. In most of the Upside-Down-like worlds he had explored, this area offered a wide shoulder to stop, give the Jeep a rest and get his strategy ready for searching the town. In his own world, this spot was still farmland, so its mirrored counterpart was clear of trees and buildings where dangers could be lurking. Looking around quickly, Mike saw nothing hiding among the vines that snaked their way across the fields so he climbed out of the Jeep and stretched his legs. In town, he usually kept himself armed with a machete strapped across his back and a pump-action shotgun slung over one shoulder; the latter having been a secret graduation present from Hopper, who had been anxious to assist however he could. Out in the open, with no signs of life nearby, Mike opted to leave the firearm where it was, mounted within easy reach on the Jeep's roll-bar.

Before setting about deciding a game-plan for the search ahead, he knew he had to tend to the Jeep. For the last ten miles or so, the engine had been running rough and was struggling to produce its normal power. Mike was familiar with the cause, and was actually pleased it waited this far into the journey to happen. Popping the latches and raising the hood, his eyes were drawn immediately to the intake on the air filter. As he had expected, the opening was coated thick with a white sludge of the Upside-Down's distinctive spores. After scraping away the accumulation with a gloved hand and flinging the muck into the ditch, he pulled the canister out of the air filter and removed a similar handful of goop. That done, Mike reassembled the filter, re-latched the hood and set about topping off the fuel from one of the gas-cans mounted along the rear bumper.

The Jeep properly tended to, Mike grabbed a canteen from the front seat and took a long swallow. Despite the bandanna acting as a makeshift filter, his mouth felt gritty and his throat dry. Looking around, he couldn't help but feel apprehension creep into his mind as he realized how deathly still and silent this world was. In most, there were occasional small animals that would dart out of the Jeep's path

or chitter at him from a tree as he walked past. This version of the Upside-Down didn't seem to have a single living thing, with the exception of the thick black vines embracing every surface.

Taking another sip, Mike quickly screwed the cap back on the canteen and decided he would stick to his usual route through town. He would start with the lab, since it was a big, secure building that could offer her protection from the elements and any life this world may have to offer. Next would be a trip out to the Byers' property. That was the closest place near the lab that she knew. He would make a pass through downtown, though he knew it was not the most likely place she would choose. The school would come after that. He reasoned if she had pulled herself straight through, the way his own portals worked, maybe she would have chosen to stay right there. Finally, he would wrap up the search in the one place he truly believed he would find her; his own basement. It had been the first place she allowed herself to think of as home and he knew in his heart it was exactly where she would go. In the past he had started his searches there, since it was the most obvious choice. However, he had quickly found that the heartbreak of not finding her there made it nearly impossible to search the rest of Hawkins. Ever since, he had forced himself to save the basement for the end of his journey.

The plan comfortably in place, Mike climbed back into the Jeep and turned the key. To his relief, the engine roared right to life and hummed along smoothly now that it could breathe clearly again. Coming into town from this direction, it was only a few minutes before he reached the derelict outer gate of the old lab. It was a long-shot that she would choose to return to the lab after all the horrors she had faced growing up there. On the other hand, it was the only home she had really ever known. As much as he liked to convince himself he had given her a new place to call home during their few, brief days together, it hadn't really been any safer or more stable than what she had been used to. As much as Will told him he couldn't blame himself, Mike knew he was a part of that home he had offered her and when the critical moment came that night, there was nothing he could do to save her. So just maybe, she had decided to return to the home she knew.

Parking near the main entrance, Mike got out and grabbed a dusty

green duffel-bag from the back seat. Opening the zipper along the top, he assured himself everything he might need was inside. It was always cumbersome to carry along, but it was easier than returning to the Jeep for more gear; the lab took long enough to search as it was. Approaching the door, he noted that the chain installed when the lab was shut down was still securely in place. Pulling a pair of bolt-cutters from the bag, he made quick work of the chain, as he had done countless times before in various incarnations of the Upside-Down. For the next two hours, Mike made a careful search of the five floors above ground for the slightest sign she had ever been there. As always, the most painful room to check was the little bedroom where she had grown up.

Finding nothing above ground, Mike knew the last place he needed to check was in the basement. While the upper stairwells remained open and easy enough to navigate, those going down were secured by heavy steel doors that remained securely locked in most versions of the world. Sure enough, this one was no different and that meant a trip down the elevator shaft. When the lab was decommissioned, the building's large freight elevator was left parked on the second floor and that meant a straight shot down by rope. After propping open the doors and securing his ropes, Mike dropped several glowsticks down the shaft to light his way. He had found early-on that flashlights were the first things to quit working in the Upside-Down and he had no interest in getting stranded in pitch blackness halfway down. It took only a few minutes to make his way down the line and pull open the doors on the lowest level. Just as he had found above ground, there was no sign another living creature, let alone a human, had ever set foot down these hallways. The sensory deprivation tank sat empty and silent. Though the wall beyond showed cracking and damage to the tiles, there was no indications a portal had ever opened through this particular version.

The climb back out of the basement was always an ordeal. Despite the penetrating chill of the Upside-Down, it always left him exhausted and dripping with sweat. The worst was that, as he made his way up one foot at a time, his mind was free to dwell on this first letdown of the journey.

"Of course she isn't here," he thought. "This was the place she was a

prisoner for the first twelve years of her life. Why would she come back here?"

He wanted to believe himself, but he wasn't sure. Then there was the matter of the tiles. There were the small cracks, but had those been from a portal or simply mirrored over from the real world? In the real lab basement, deep scars remained in the wall where the gateway had ripped open, but had it been as severe on the other side? Once it closed, had it healed itself better on this end? While the lab wall remained in disarray, the portals that opened into the Byers' living room had healed themselves entirely. Every question just spawned more confusion, and he had to force himself to focus on the climb.

Thirty minutes later, he finally swung his feet up over the sill of the elevator shaft and hoisted himself out. Working quickly, he bundled the ropes and equipment back into the duffel and made his way outside. The blue tint in the sky was giving way to a deeper darkness and he knew he had to get moving before night fell and he would be forced to settle in for a restless wait tucked away in the Jeep. Climbing behind the wheel, he breathed a deep sigh of relief as he turned the key and the engine roared to life. In the back of his mind he always feared making the trek back to Indianapolis on foot again.

A few minutes later Mike found himself pulling down the familiar gravel driveway and parking in front of the house where he spent countless afternoons as a child. Aside from the vines, the Byers' place looked virtually the same as it had when he was growing up. A part of him always thought Eleven might come here since it was where Will had hidden himself away during his week on the run from the demogorgon. He could almost see her, standing in the doorway, waiting expectantly as he pulled up. Of course that never happened at any of the previous versions of the house, and she wasn't waiting for him out front here either.

As he climbed out of the Jeep, he called to her. "El? Are you here?" He paused, giving her a chance to respond. "Eleven?"

Hoping beyond hope she was inside, asleep and dreaming of someplace beautiful, Mike shouldered his way through the front door and quickly surveyed the house. El was nowhere to be found. Neither

were any indications she had ever been there. The furniture, vine covered and slimy, were the belongings of the new owners who had bought the house from Mrs. Byers. After Jonathan moved to New York and Will headed off to college in Chicago, Joyce and her new husband, Bob Newby, had decided to put their dark memories of Hawkins behind them and moved to Maine.

After searching the house, Mike headed into the woods to check on Castle Byers. Of all the places on his route, he knew this one was by far the furthest long-shot, but in his mind he knew he had to check it all the same. It was here she had found Will, so there was a chance she would wait for him there. Ignoring the encroaching darkness, Mike hiked down the familiar path through the woods until he came to a small clearing. In his youth, the hastily constructed fort would have been standing proudly in the center, but today, in this version of the Upside-Down, the clearing stood empty, save for the tangle of vines snaking their way across the ground. It made sense, given the presence of the newer furniture back in the house. Will had taken apart the fort years ago, with Mike and Dustin's help, having never felt safe playing there after the events of 1983.

Arriving back at the Jeep as night came on in full force, Mike checked over the shotgun and stowed it away at the ready before unwrapping a PowerBar and uncapping the canteen. He would catch a few hours of sleep - or as close to sleep as he could manage - in the Byers' driveway before setting out for downtown when the light returned to the sky. In the quiet of the night, Mike fought hard against the doubts that tried to force their way back into his mind. From the safety of home, it was easy enough to picture El finding shelter, food, water; all the things she would need to survive. She was resourceful and strong. She was capable of a million spectacular things. She was the most singularly amazing person he had ever had the great fortune to know. At home, he had very little doubt she could do whatever it took to survive the Upside-Down until he could reach her.

In the dark of the night, reclined in the Jeep's driver seat with an old wool blanket pulled tight for warmth, all the grim voices in the back of his mind began to come forward, bringing their what-ifs with them. What if she had been hurt fighting the demogorgon? What if

she hadn't been able to find her way to someplace safe? What if there wasn't actually anything edible in her version of the Upside-Down? What if the things she tried turned out to be poisonous? It had taken him years to learn how to deal with the voices that threatened to drag him into despair. Somehow, deep in his soul, he knew she was still alive, wherever she was. It was a feeling that ran deeper than wishful thinking; there were times he could actually feel her there with him. Most people would think he was out of his mind if he said that, but Mike knew Will believed him. He had felt it himself, the night she found him through the pool, as he hid in Castle Byers.

The other what-ifs that haunted his mind were much harder to make go away. What if he had run to the front of the room and pulled her free of the cloud as she ripped the demogorgon apart? What if he had led them in a different direction to get out of the school before the soldiers could corner them? What if he had looked out the window in the cafeteria as soon as he saw the headlights instead of wasting time running out front? What if there had been something, anything, he could have done different that night to save her? What if he hadn't written such an elaborate campaign for that weekend? They would have been done with the game sooner and Will would have been safely home before the demogorgon even made it out of the lab. That was always the hardest to contemplate. If Will had never been taken, they would never have been out in the woods looking for him the next night, and they never would have found Eleven. Maybe she would have made it out of Hawkins, found a kind family to take her in and keep her safe. Mike knew it was selfish and it left him with a hollow pit of guilt in his stomach, but if Will had never been taken, he never would have met El, and the thought of going through life without ever knowing her seemed almost unbearable. But meeting her set in motion the very events that imprisoned her, cut off from the world and fighting for her life.

On through the night Mike wrestled his guilt and doubts and only as the light began to return to the sky did he beat them into submission for another day. He counted himself fortunate that this world seemed devoid of dangerous predators, but he knew one could always be lurking in the shadows, stalking him and waiting for the right moment to strike. Shaking the night from his mind, Mike climbed out of the Jeep long enough to stretch his legs and relieve himself before

starting up the engine and heading for town. As he drove, he absentmindedly gnawed on another PowerBar and readied himself for the hike around downtown. He knew it was the part of Hawkins she had been the least familiar with, but just beyond easily broken windows, the shops of downtown held a lot of things that would probably be useful for survival.

Parking at the end of Main street, Mike set out on foot to check through downtown. This part of the search always left him filled with apprehension as he walked passed the familiar storefronts he had been by hundreds of times growing up. Covered in dark vines, he knew there could be all manner of creatures watching him from the shadows, cowering in the same shelters he thought Eleven might have made use of. To make matters worse, there was far too much ground to search as carefully as he would like. This meant he had to call out to her, loudly and often as he walked, giving away his location to anything that might be interested. On other worlds, Mike had faced several close-calls with predators who thought he might make an easy meal, but walking through this version of Hawkins, not a single sign of life appeared. This fact left him both relieved for his own safety, and heartbroken at the thought of El having to keep herself fed in such a lifeless world.

With downtown searched to his satisfaction, Mike made his way over to the school and set out on foot again, roaming the familiar halls of his youth. Searching the school always left him choked up and he had to fight to keep the tears at bay as he checked room after room. The gym where she had bravely sent her mind across the universe to find his best friend. The cafeteria where he had foolishly stumbled around trying to explain just how he felt about her, culminating in a first kiss that he could only pray she understood the meaning behind. The classroom where she made her final stand, where she bravely declared "No more," as she sacrificed everything to keep him safe. The hallway where he had, moments earlier, tried to do the same for her, telling armed soldiers they would have to kill him to get to her. Here he paused, running a hand over the wall where the demogorgon had clawed its way through. Maybe it was only his brain clinging desperately to hope, but he could feel several large cracks running through the brick beneath years of vines and slime. In spite of the cracks, the school held no more signs of her than the rest of town.

Climbing back into the Jeep, Mike made the short drive to where he knew his long search would finally come to an end. Parking in front of his childhood home always gave his stomach a twinge. It had been the location of so many happy childhood memories. It had been where he spent countless happy Saturdays playing games with his friends. It was also place where he brought Eleven and promised to keep her safe. When he failed to do that, it had become his entire world as he toiled unceasingly in the basement to find a way back to her. He sat behind the wheel for a long time just starting at the house, afraid of both knowing and not knowing. If she wasn't here, this was not her Upside-Down, and he would be forced to return to the his own world in defeat yet again. It was a familiar outcome, but that never made it any easier. If anything, each failure left him feeling more broken than before.

Knowing he couldn't put it off forever, Mike shut off the Jeep and climbed out. Checking the blade across his back and the shotgun slung over his shoulder, he set off toward the house. Like everything else, it had become routine and he could play out the steps in his mind. Fifty paces from street to the corner of the house. Take a deep breath. Round the corner and twenty-six more paces to the basement door. Try the knob, locked as always.

"El? Are you there?" he called out. She would probably be wary of noises outside. "Eleven?"

No answer. He braced his feet and slammed a shoulder into the door. The aged wood gave way without hesitation and he had gained a lot of practice breaking it open, over and over again. He stepped inside and took stock of the space around him; as empty and lifeless as the rest of this world had been. Eleven was not here.

The numbness washed over him in a cold wave. It wrapped him like a blanket and sucked the very life out of him. He had wanted her to be here so badly; convinced himself this had to be the right world. He would finally bring her home and save her from the horrible existence he had failed to protect her from so long ago. An old couch now sat where her blanket fort once stood and a part of him wanted to lay down and let the world just close in around him, but Mike knew his job wasn't done. He had to get himself home before he let himself fall apart. If he didn't make it back in time, Will would come

in after him, and the horror of subjecting his best friend to this world was enough to keep him focused.

Mike walked slowly back to the Jeep, ready to complete one final ritual and bring his search of this world to a close, before heading for home. In the back seat, he opened the cooler, pulled out a familiar yellow box and started back toward the basement. It was all in his notes back at home, but Mike didn't need those to keep track of how many times he had made this walk of defeat; this was number fifty. He had given plenty of worlds a cursory glance, but fifty times now, he had come to a world absolutely certain he was going to find her. Kneeling before door, Mike laid a box of Eggos on the worn and grime-coated Welcome mat. Across the infinite expanse of worlds, fifty boxes of frozen waffles sat carefully placed in front of fifty basement doors, in silent memory of a girl he would not let be forgotten.

"I'm sorry El," he whispered, tears falling unchecked on the thin yellow cardboard. "I'm trying, but I don't know how to find you. Please hold on. I won't give up, please don't give up on me."

Wiping desperately at the tears, Mike pulled the goggles down over his eyes and the bandanna back over his face. Climbing numbly back into the Jeep, Mike fired up the engine and started back toward Indianapolis to contemplate his Valentine's Day disappointment.

5. Chapter 5

Driving the long, bleak road back to Indianapolis, Mike operated more on auto-pilot than anything else. The pain of not finding her threatened to shut him down entirely and he felt like another piece of his soul broke away and stayed behind, keeping silent vigil alongside the Eggos at the basement door. He had spent years learning how to cope with the pain, but it never got easier. He had tried to numb it away or channel it elsewhere but those strategies never worked for long and most were ultimately more destructive than the pain itself. As the miles ticked away, Mike kept lifting the goggles long enough to wipe at his eyes before finally pulling them off entirely; the last thing he needed was to run off the road in this unforgiving wilderness. That naturally led him to think, "why not?" Why shouldn't he be stranded in a place like this? It's where Eleven has been stranded for two decades. She's been stuck alone in a cold, desolate, dangerous place all because he couldn't figure out how to find her. Onward the thoughts raced, one around the other, first blaming, then reassuring, then hopeless, then determined. All he wanted to do was silence the voices and just make it all go away; not forever, just for a little while. Just until it didn't hurt so bad that he could hardly breathe.

Mike Wheeler wanted a drink.

In the old days, he would have had a bottle waiting back in the lab, tucked away on the high shelf of a cabinet. He'd park the Jeep, grab the bottle and down a glass or two and just let the numbness wash over him. In time, two glasses had led to three and then to four and after that he just stopped counting. The glasses, with their elixir of forgetfulness, followed him home and soon he was spending more of his life sauced into oblivion than not. At work, he hid the inebriation well enough that nobody ever called him on it; he knew he needed the resources of the university to continue his search. At his worst, the only time he forced himself to sober up at all was when he had a new lead to follow up on. He knew he needed his wits about him in the Upside-Down, and the hope of finally finding her was enough motivation to put down the bottle. Of course, returning home in disappointment, he only hit the drink harder to make up for lost

time.

All that came to a stop when he hit rock bottom and a new wave of purpose washed over him; or maybe it was the ice-cold pitcher of water Will had thrown on him. It was November 7, 1996 - day 4743 - and it was thirteen years to the day from when he had first met her, that night in the rain. He had spent the day searching yet another Upside-Down with the same results as always. On top of his usual shattered spirits, a massive rainstorm had slowed his progress getting back. After parking the Jeep, he had gone straight for the bottle, planning on having one quick glass before letting Will know he was safely home. A second glass finished off that bottle and he pulled a fresh one from its hiding place in the back of his desk drawer. Something about the failed search, the rainstorm which coincided with one raging outside in the real world and the anniversary, all pulled together to leave him devastated and broken. At one point, the thought crossed his mind to take the whole machine apart, burn his journals and put to rest what the dark voices in the back of his head were telling him was a lost cause, but that would take at least one more drink first. The last thing he remembered was pulling out the other backup bottle he kept tucked away on the shelf in a box of spare parts and old wire.

The cold water had hit him like a sharp slap in the face and he was immediately awake, sputtering and taking stock of his surroundings. The first thing his eyes focused on was a furious Will Byers standing over him, the dripping pitcher still clenched tight in his fist.

"What the hell, Will?" Mike eventually croaked out, his mouth raw and cottony.

He looked around, trying to get his bearings. Eventually he put together that he was still in the lab, sitting on the floor, propped against the wall. Slowly Mike's eyes found their way back to his friend's face, still tight with anger and tried desperately to search for the reason. There was little that could set Will off like that so it had to have been something pretty bad he had done this time.

"What the hell are you doing?" Will asked, the accusation dripping in his voice. "You never sent an all-clear to let me know you were back."

Only then did it register in Mike's head what his friend was wearing: brown cargo pants and hiking boots, an old t-shirt under a heavy canvas jacket and a baseball cap; the whole outfit was out of place for Will Byers. His best friend had come to the lab to find him, ready to step foot back into the Upside-Down, the place that had almost killed him years before.

Mike looked down, too ashamed to meet Will's hard stare. "I'm sorry," he began. "I just..." He trailed off, not sure how to finish the sentence without feeling like a selfish asshole. The whole point of him telling Will he was going out and when he got back, was motivation to make sure he found his way home in one piece. The last thing he wanted to do was make his best friend - his only real friend at this point - have to relive the worst experience of his life.

"Yeah, I know. You were just going to have one drink. Or maybe two. Just enough to calm yourself down and numb the pain," Will threw back, unsympathetic. "This isn't the first time we've had this conversation, you know."

In truth, he understood what Mike was going through and much of his anger was just masking over the fear of going back to that terrible place, and the wash of relief that he wouldn't have to make the trip after all. Still, he could see his friend was in a dangerous spiral and the time had come to put a stop to it. They had made a pact long ago that if they were going crazy, they would go crazy together. Mike had helped him make it through with his sanity intact and he was determined to return the favor.

Softening a little, Will sat down next to Mike and pulled the bottle out of his hand. Twisting off the lid, he took a long swig, almost choking as the burn spread quickly down his throat and up through his sinuses.

"I don't know how you drink this stuff," he teased as he passed the bottle back. "Drink up. Have as much as you want tonight. Tomorrow we're dumping it out. All of it."

Mike stared blankly at his friend, desperately grasping at each word, trying to follow his meaning.

"You can't keep running from your pain like this. There aren't any answers waiting for you at the bottom of a bottle." Will offered, hoping Mike was following what he was saying. "I know you're hurting and I know you blame yourself for what happened that night, but we have to find you a better way to deal with this. Have you started working on the garden like we talked about?" He was met with blank stare in response. "Yeah, you were pretty trashed that time too. When you miss her, when you feel depressed or hopeless or this all gets to be too much, go to your garden and plant something beautiful, something that makes you think of her. She will need something pretty to come home to after her time in the Upside-Down."

"I couldn't save her, Will. And now I can't find her." To punctuate his point, he drained another swallow from the bottle. "Is this really such a terrible way to deal with it?"

"Do you want to wind up like Hopper?" Will accused, pausing to let the comprehension sink in. "He let the pain eat him up and he drank it away too, and look where that got him. A pine box an foot plot in the forgotten back corner of Hawkins cemetery."

Mike hung his head again; he knew the details well enough, he had made the funeral arrangements himself. "You don't understand. What the guilt feels like, I mean. Hopper got it. He was the reason they knew where to find her that night. When they came for her, I wasn't able to do a damn thing to stop them." He paused, wiping furiously at his eyes, fighting to keep the tears at bay. "The bad men came for her, and then the demogorgon came for her, and when she needed me the most, someone to care for her and protect her, I couldn't save her. You have no idea what that feels like."

In a flash, Will wrenched the bottle out of Mike's hand and drained a long swallow before slamming it down hard on the cold concrete floor. He stared hard at Mike, his face contorting with a thousand competing emotions. "You really think I don't know how it feels?" he spat. "You think the guilt doesn't gnaw at me in the night? None of you would have even been there that night if it wasn't for me. Mom and Hopper went to the lab that night because of me. You were all at the school that night, because Eleven offered to come find me. Everything that happened, happened because I got myself taken by

the demogorgon in the first place."

Mike stared hard at his friend. For thirteen years, Mike had watched Will come to terms with everything that had happened, and helped him through in whatever way he could. He had lent Will a sympathetic ear and a shoulder to cry on as he fought the dark memories coursing through his head. In all that time, Will had never let on the guilt he carried about how it all came to an end.

"I never wanted it to happen, you know." Will continued, the tears breaking through his angry facade. "I never wanted anyone to get hurt because of me. If I had known what would happen, I think I would have let the thing catch me and finish me off from the beginning."

"Will," Mike began, unsure quite what to say to help his friend. "What happened that night wasn't your fault."

"And it wasn't yours, either," Will interjected. "So I can't sit by and watch you slowly kill yourself. She's out there, and she needs you." He paused, taking a deep breath and feeling the whisky starting to work its magic. "I'm not brave enough to step foot back into the Upside-Down myself, so the best I can do is keep try to keep you on track."

Driving through the cracked and jagged roads of the Upside-Down, Mike thought hard about that night, or more appropriately, the next morning. He and Will had awoken in his lab with throbbing headaches, and as much as he wanted a drink to take the edge off, he kept his word to Will. He hadn't given up alcohol entirely, but from that day, he never drank in the lab, or at home. If he wanted a drink, he would head over to Will's house, where his friend had a bottle of the good stuff tucked away for him to enjoy in moderation and under close supervision. It had become one of his usual stops when he got home from another failed search, but it wasn't his only indulgence to ease the pain of failure.

As badly as he wanted to put this world behind him, he eventually gave in to the fatigue and pulled the Jeep to a stop in another familiar location along the route. The engine needed to rest, and though his mind was still tearing itself apart in grief and blame, he

closed his eyes for an hour or two of fitful sleep as well. Rested, but by no means refreshed, he started out again well before dawn brought its feeble tint to the Upside-Down sky.

As Mike pulled the Jeep back through the portal and into the familiar surroundings of his lab, he knew what he had to do; he needed to send Will the all-clear, unload his supplies, and then probably drive to his friend's house for a drink. It was the right thing to do, and the healthy way to deal with his renewed grief. Instead he walked over to the computer and dismissed the current portal. He flipped open his journal of known worlds and ran a finger down a worn page to a world simply labeled "Don't." He knew the address by heart, but didn't trust himself to get it right without looking it up to be sure. Dialing the destination into the computer, he watched as a fresh portal materialized in the middle of the lab. Walking back to the Jeep, he considered the shotgun for a moment before settling on the machete, which he slung across his back; he needed more personal, hands-on healing.

As he walked up to the portal, Mike tried to convince himself one more time to turn around and shutdown the gate. He could go to Will's and drown his sorrows with his friend and leave this world alone. He knew what he was about to do was wrong and would ultimately leave him feeling more hollow than before, but he was going all the same. Mike took a deep breath and stepped into the world of "Don't."

AN: I just want to take a moment to thank everyone who has given this story a follow, a favorite, or a review. I know this story is running a little darker than what I usually write, so I really appreciate the feedback and knowing that is still connecting with people.

6. Chapter 6

AN: Just a brief note to those who recognize the following chapter from *The Long Search*. This was one of the first scenes that came together in my mind as I set out outlining this story and before I decided to get things rolling with the related one-shots. I considered cutting it but I felt it still had its place in Mike's story and thought it belonged here. For those that have read it before, I promise, this is on the only chapter I have lifted from the previous one-shots. It has also been modified and extended just a little from its original form.

Hours later, Mike finally found himself right-side up in the real world, back in the Jeep and putting his lab miles behind him. The portal into the world of "Don't" was safely shutdown again, and Mike promised himself that was the last time he would go back there. He knew it was a lie, but it was one he had to tell himself all the same. Like always, it hadn't brought the relief he went in hoping to find. So now, as the miles ticked away, he found himself seeking restoration of another kind. He was quickly falling apart, and needed someone to put him together again. Though he sought it out, he felt guilty all the same; why should he seek out another to help with his healing, when Eleven was stuck with no one to turn to when thing became unbearable.

"Just two more miles," he thought to himself as he turned a corner and continued out into a quiet suburb on the outskirts of Indianapolis. The unseasonably clear sky and bright midday sun struck him as some kind of cruel joke as he shifted gears and picked up speed. Mike was running on emotional fumes and barely holding it together. He hadn't slept more than a few minutes at a stretch in the last two days and his nerves were shot. He hated that he had allowed himself to get too hopeful once again. Like all the other times, the dead-end had left him drained, hollow, and unsure how to go on.

Eventually, he reached an unassuming two-story home on a quiet cul-de-sac: his emotional salvation. With every failure, he somehow

found his way here on instinct and arrived broken and empty and in desperate need of a friend to put him back together. Stumbling his way to the front door, he rang the bell and then gave the door several loud knocks for good measure. While he waited, he reached down with numb, trembling fingers and undid the laces on his muddy boots, kicking them blindly off to the side. He was about to knock again, when the door swung open and she was there.

"Hey Jen," he choked out.

"Jesus, Mike. You look like hell," she said, eyes full of concern, as she pulled him into a tight embrace. "I wasn't sure you were even coming by. Come on in," she said, standing to one side and allowing him into the entryway. He stepped in and then waited as she closed the door behind him. Turning to face him once more, she noticed the strap still running across his chest. "Uh, Mike, you've still got on the, uh..." as she pointed toward the machete sheathed across his back.

"Oh, right. Sorry. Not sure how I even drove here with that thing on," he replied, undoing the strap and pulling the scabbard from his back, passing it over to her.

Reaching out a hand, she took it from him with an exasperated sigh. "Come on, he's in the study."

Jennifer Hayes-Byers led the way down the hall of the home she and Will had purchased several years before, when Will's psychiatry practice had taken off. He followed blindly, running on autopilot as she ushered him into the study and guided him toward one of the overstuffed leather chairs. She knew the chair would need a thorough scrub to get rid of the sweat and grime clinging to Mike after his trying weekend, but she recognized the importance of what he was undertaking and that made the inconvenience more than worth it.

"I'll leave you boys to it," she said, eying Will who was settled in the matching chair, as she backed out of the room and closed the door behind her.

Mike looked up and met the concerned eyes of his best friend before dropping his gaze to the table between them and contemplating the bottle of MacNaughton whisky waiting there.

"Oh, go on," Will offered, "we both know that's the real reason you're here."

Throwing his friend a grateful glance, Mike reached for the bottle and twisted off the lid. As he poured a generous glass of the soothing amber spirit, Will added, "Might as well pour me one too." Mike gave a half-hearted laugh at his friend. Will detested whisky and only ever drank it with Mike after yet another devastating disappointment; he was more of a merlot-man, he liked to say.

Mike drained a large swallow and settled back in his chair, savoring the burn that slowly sank down his throat.

"So, you want to tell me about it?" Will asked, gingerly taking a sip from his own glass.

"What's there to tell? I went in, sure I was going to find her, and I came back alone. End of story," he tossed out, staring intently at the contents of his glass and deciding to send another swig down to join its companion.

"Oh cut the shit, Mike," Will spat out, startling his friend. "You're my best friend, I think I can read you a little better than that. I know this wasn't just a normal lead you were following; those don't floor you like this anymore. You look like death and you're practically overdue. Much longer and I was going to have to come in after you, and we both know how little I want to do that. On top of that, you still have blood-spatter on your shirt and I'm guessing it's all over that blade you left with Jen, so we both know where you went after you got back to the lab."

Mike looked shamefully up at Will as his friend asked again, softness returning to his voice, "So tell me about it. What happened?"

"I really thought I was on the right track this time. Everything seemed to match what I've been looking for. Roads, houses, cars. The vines and the spores, just like you described them. I scouted the usual route but there wasn't a single sign a human had ever set foot anywhere around there."

"You've searched worlds like that before, with leads just as strong. So

what happened this time?" Will asked, pressing Mike to unburden his mind.

Mike took a deep, steadying breath. "I don't know, really. Something just snapped inside me on the trip back. I think it was a lot of things all coming together at once. Yesterday was Valentine's Day, and I know it's stupid, but some part of me thought it would be fitting to find her on such a perfect day. It's also been almost a year since I've had a world that was such a strong a match. Worst of all, this was number fifty."

He paused and took another long swallow.

"Fifty times, Will. Fifty times, I've gone through that portal, certain that would be the time I would find her. All the pieces of the puzzle lined up, I would walk up to the basement door, or the lab, or your house, and there she'd be, hardly believing I had finally come. I'd take her in my arms and promise to never lose her again. And fifty times I've come back through the portal alone, felling like a little bit less of myself made it home."

He paused, looking up at Will and then casting his eyes down in shame. "After I got back, I just felt so angry and hollow. I went back to the other place." he admitted, long suppressed tears finally beginning to fall. "I'm sorry. I know I said I wouldn't go back there but I just couldn't help it." he sobbed. "I found a group of those things, the little ones like sheep, grazing on a field of wildflowers, and I just started slashing at them. I know they're not really demogorgons, but they look so much like them, I just didn't care. If I knew where to find a real one, I'd go there in a heartbeat, but until then, those demo-sheep things will have to do. I probably killed twenty of them before I finally came to my senses and collapsed sobbing in the field. The stupid things don't even know enough to be afraid of me, the others just kept on eating, wandering around the bodies of the fallen. I'm not sure how long I laid there before I finally got back up and made my way here."

Will watched his friend down the final swig from his glass and pour himself another. "Look Mike, I'm not going to sit here and tell you what you did was healthy, or even ethical, but we're also dealing with uncharted territory here. I can tell you, I understand."

Mike looked up hopefully as Will continued. "As your friend, and as your doctor, though, I have to be frank. You have to stop doing this to yourself."

Anger flashed across Mike's face as he moved to respond, but Will silenced him with a gently raised hand. "That's not what I mean, and you know it. I'm not asking you to stop your quest to bring her home; far from it. She saved my life that day and I want you to find her just as much as you do. No, what I'm saying is, you're undertaking a search against astronomical odds. I firmly believe you will find her. I wouldn't let you continue if I didn't think there was a chance. But with the odds stacked so much against you, you can't fall apart like this every time a lead doesn't pan out. Is that what she would want?" he asked, nodding his head toward his desk.

Sitting on the top shelf, next to a photo of Will and Jennifer on their wedding day, was a sketch of El. Mike thought back to that fall, after Will was home from the hospital, when he had asked his friend to sketch her portrait. Will had poured over the drawing for days, starting with his own fevered recollection from when she found him in the Void. Then he refined it with input from Mike, Dustin and Lucas until they all agreed he had captured her face exactly. He had given Mike the original but insisted on keeping a copy for himself as well.

Mike stared hard at the framed portrait, the face he had committed so firmly into his mind he saw her every time he shut his eyes.

"I know I never met her; not really," Will continued. "But you've told me every last piece of information you knew about her and what she was like. I can safely say she wouldn't want you tearing yourself apart like this. If she's out there, in the place you think she is, your memory is likely the only comfort she has to keep her going. When you bring her home, she deserves the boy she remembers, not some vacant husk like this. And you're making progress Mike, you really are. Yeah, you slipped up today and went on your therapeutic murder-spree, but it's been a long time since you've done that. And you've confined your drinking to our visits over here; you're not losing days at a time drunk at home anymore."

"I just..." Mike began, before stopping to collect his thoughts once

more. The exhaustion and whisky were rapidly dragging him under. "I just keep thinking, what if there was something more I could have done that night; some way I could have stopped her from having to kill it herself? And I keep worrying, what if I'm already too late? I mean, a week in that place almost killed you, and I've left her rotting there for twenty years."

Mike looked back at his friend, ashamed as he saw the panic of recollection cross Will's face as he downed the last of his drink.

"I'm sorry. I know I've made you relive that week more times than you deserve. But you know what I mean."

Calm as ever, Will asked, "Do you honestly believe she blames you at all for what happened that night? Do you think she would want you blaming yourself?"

Mike shook his head, knowing his friend was right. It wasn't the first time they had this conversation and likely wouldn't be the last.

"As for my time in the Upside-Down, sure, that week almost killed me. But I was on the run the whole time, never sleeping, no time to figure out if there was something to eat or water to drink. Then the demogorgon got me and jammed that tentacle-egg thing down my throat and tried to turn me into an incubator. So, yeah, a week almost killed me. Eleven? If she killed that thing on the way through, then she would have had time to actually get her bearings, find food and water, and someplace safe to stay."

"And don't forget all those super-powers you've spent years telling me about," he added with a grin. "Look, I don't know how many times now you've told me you can still feel her; like she's standing right there next to you or whispering something into your mind across the universe; I believe you. My mom said the same thing when everyone tried to tell her I was dead. So as long as you can still feel her there, watching over your shoulder and urging you on, I have no doubt she's still out there. And that means you need to pick yourself up, pull yourself back together, and start again."

At that, Mike smiled. It was just what he needed to hear, and Will knew it. They lapsed into silence as Mike slowly drained the rest of

his glass. Minutes later, sleep finally won out as Mike laid his head back and closed his eyes. Will grabbed an old wool blanket from the closet and laid it over his friend, carefully slipping the glass out of Mike's hand. Walking out of the office, he closed the door gently behind him and walked down the hall to the living room, where he found Jennifer curled up on the couch with a book. As he sat down next to her, she closed the book and shifted to cuddle up to him.

"So, how bad is it? He going to be alright?" she asked, concerned for their friend.

"Oh, he'll wake up sometime tomorrow with a killer headache. But like always, he'll pop a couple Advil, drink a pot of coffee, and get right back to work tracking down his next lead."

"Do you really think he'll find her?"

"I think so," he said, then, "I hope so. I have a lot to thank her for," he added, pulling his wife closer.

7. Chapter 7

Just as Will had predicted, Mike awoke the next morning with a throbbing head and a stiff neck, but also somehow feeling just a little bit better. Through bleary eyes and a churning stomach - he couldn't quite recall when he had last eaten - he made his way to the Byers' guest bathroom where a fresh towel and a change of clothes were waiting for him. He couldn't help but laugh to himself how even his breakdowns had apparently become routine. Standing under the hot spray of the shower, he scrubbed away the last remains of the upside down and felt more of the guilty weight of this latest failure swirl down the drain with the grime. After dressing, he headed out to the kitchen where he found half a pot of coffee waiting for him along with a note from Will:

Thought it was best to let you sleep. Called Marge and told her you were fighting the flu. Chris is covering your exam. Take it easy today and get your head back on straight. Plant something pretty for her.

-Will

Mike looked at the clock and was startled to find it was already 11:00. After pouring a large mug of black coffee and helping himself to a slice of toast, he settled himself at the table to finish clearing the cobwebs out of his head. He knew Will was right; he couldn't let these failures suck him down into a pit of despair, or he'd never find El. He wasn't sure just what he would do without his best friend watching out for him, and he prayed he'd never have to find out.

After pouring a tall travel mug of coffee to go, Mike gathered his grimy Upside-Down clothes and the bloodstained machete and headed out to the Jeep, locking up the house behind him. He knew the first stop he had to make on his way home, and swung by the garden center to collect a rose bush that was waiting to be picked up. He had gone in there the month before in search of something specific, and they had needed to special order it from a grower out west. As soon as he saw the delicate buds, just barely beginning to reveal their true color, he knew he had made the right choice. It was a pale pink, almost white at first glance, but it was a perfect match to the dress she had worn, the day he told Eleven he thought she was

pretty.

Little by little, Mike began to pick up the pieces and carry on. After spending some time in the garden, finding just the right spot for his latest addition, he went back to the lab and put everything back in order. He stocked up supplies for the next journey and gave the Jeep's engine a once-over to ensure it would carry him out and back safely the next time he went in. Days turned to weeks and life fell back into routine. He would teach his classes, put in some hours in the lab maintaining the rigs so vital to his search, and spend a little time paying lip-service to the research the university was funding him for. Mostly, he spent his days thinking of her; praying she was alright, hoping she hadn't given up on him. At night, alone in the quite dark, he would dream the dream and wake up in a cold sweat, his throat burning from screaming her name.

March brought a new lead, followed closely by another two in early April. They were decent leads - enough to warrant a search - but nothing strong enough to shatter him the way his Valentine's disappointment had. May found him in a bit of a slump in regards to potential worlds, but he was making progress in expanding the search further. Under the guise of his university research, enhancing a piece of medical hardware, Mike had developed a new oscillator that added another five gigahertz to the range of addresses he could search. The flip-side of this breakthrough, of course, was that it meant billions of additional addresses to be searched.

Sitting in the lab, Mike was working diligently to upgrade one of the airlock rigs with the enhanced dialing hardware - his third units of the afternoon - and his vision was beginning to blur from prolonged hours staring at the tiny circuits. Leaning back in his chair, he rubbed tired hands across his eyes and willed them back into focus. As the world came back into clarity, his gaze fell on his hat, hanging on its peg on the wall awaiting the next journey into the Upside-Down. Leaning forward, he plucked the hat down and closely regarded the worn brown felt, wiping away a few chunky spores that remained stuck to the brim. It was more than an accessory; in many ways, it had become almost a friend and companion as it had traveled with him through countless worlds. But like so many good friends, the relationship had come out of rocky beginnings. Running his fingers

across the soft surface, Mike let his mind run back to the early days of his search.

Thursday November 12, 1987. Day 1460. It had been four years, to the day, since she had saved his life and then disappeared into the Upside-Down with the demogorgon. Four years of waiting, of worrying, and working. In fits and starts he had built a working machine, ready to open a gate into any world he chose to dial. Only after perfecting the process did he come to the horrifying realization of just what a daunting task finding the right world would be. It had also been one week since he had searched his first real, promising match. All the characteristics of the Upside-Down seemed to be in place and he had let his hopes get the better of him. He had even thrown a box of Eggos into his backpack, ready to surprise her with the beloved treat to remind her of happier moments. When his search finally ended in defeat, he had left the box in the Upside-Down on the basement porch, the first of many tributes that would dot the countless versions of Hawkins he would visit.

After returning home, he had spent every free moment just staring at the machine in hopeless despair; an empty portal waiting to be dialed, illuminating him with its faint red glow. His friends had done their best to distract him and pull him out of his latest slump, but for the last two days he had shut them out as well, skipping school and ignoring their attempts to reach him on the SuperComm. Knowing he needed to clear his head and collect his thoughts somewhere his creation wasn't mocking him, Mike snuck two beers from the fridge, knowing his Dad wouldn't miss them, and went for a walk along the old train-tracks to think. Something had been nagging at him for a while and he knew he had to face it down if he was going to move forward.

As he drained the two cans of cheap lager, Mike made his way to the tavern where he knew Jim Hopper could most likely be found. The disgraced man had been relieved of his position with the city police two years earlier when it became clear he could no longer keep the drinking and painkillers in check and it was interfering too much with his job. Most in town attributed his downward spiral to the memory of his daughter Sara, who he had lost years before, but Mike had come to realize there might be more than one guilt dragging him

under.

He spent several hours waiting in the shadows of the parking lot, the buzz wearing off but his resolve holding firm. Finally, his patience paid off as he watched Hopper stumble his way out the door, fumbling through his coat pockets in a desperate hunt for his keys. He managed to wrestle them free and was working to unlock his driver side door when Mike stepped out of the darkness.

"Hello Chief," he began, the title once full of respect, now dripping with disdain.

Startled, Hopper spun around.

"Wheeler?" he asked, trying to pull his eyes into focus. "What are you doing here?"

"It took me a long time to realize it was true; maybe I was just deluding myself because I didn't want to believe it. Dustin called it the second the soldiers showed up, but I didn't think he could be right. I had promised her that you could be trusted, that you would help us keep her safe." Mike swallowed hard, realizing he was starting to ramble and willing himself to go get his question out. "It was you, wasn't it? You're the reason the lab knew where to find her that night, weren't you?"

The question finally spoken out loud, Mike paused, staring hard at the one person in town he had thought he could really trust. He hadn't planned out just how he would handle the response, perhaps still holding out some hope that he had read the situation wrong. The look of shame that crossed Hopper's face was all the answer he needed. Before even contemplating what he was doing, he swung his arm wide and landed a sharp right hook to side of the Chief's jaw. In truth, the punch had hurt Mike more than Hopper; naive of any fighting technique, he had left his thumb tucked under his fingers and nearly dislocated the digit in the process. Still, the blow had been enough to knock the already stumbling Hopper off his feet and backward into his car. As he sat there, stunned by the blow, Mike slumped down next to him, back resting against the rear driver side door.

"Why?" he asked softly, the anger rapidly ebbing away.

Unable to answer, the full weight of the guilt dragging him under, Hopper broke down sobbing; the pain of remorse practically radiating off his shaking frame. They sat in silence for several long minutes, Hopper letting free his bottled guilt and Mike unsure how to comfort the man, and undecided if he even deserved consolation.

"Come on, let's get you home," Mike gently offered, helping Hopper to his feet.

After retrieving the keys from where they had fallen on the cold asphalt, Mike walked him around to the passenger side and helped him in, before returning to the driver side and sliding in behind the wheel. Neither spoke as they drove through town and out to Hopper's trailer by the lake, both lost in thought over the parts they had played that terrible night and the ways they had desperately tried to cope. After helping Hopper inside and onto the living room couch, Mike checked the freezer for something to help with the bruise quickly blackening the man's jawline.

Looking around the neglected kitchen, Mike was startled to realize just how far the former police Chief had fallen into despair. Most of the counter and the entire kitchen table were covered in alternating layers of discarded mail, crushed beer cans and empty takeout boxes. Dishes were piled dangerously high in the sink and looked as though they had been sitting there for weeks already. He checked the fridge and wasn't surprised to find there was nothing but beer and half-eaten takeout that looked ready to get up and walk out on its own. The freezer finally yielded an old bag of peas that took a few minutes to free from the thick frost surrounding it.

After tossing the frozen veggies to Hopper, Mike ventured back into the kitchen and managed to unearth a coffeepot in one corner of the counter. It took a little more digging but he finally found a can of coffee grounds he was pretty sure wouldn't make them sick.

"Can coffee go bad?" he wondered out loud as he cleared enough dishes to get a carafe of water out of the sink.

An hour and two mugs of coffee later, Mike was finally able to coax

an explanation from Hopper about just what happened the night he went to the lab to get Will back.

"Time was running out, and we had to get Will," he began. "I thought I could get Joyce and I down to the basement like I had done the last time, but they were on us before we even hit the front door. When they separated us and started hitting me with a stun-gun to the neck, I thought I could work out some kind of deal; access to the portal and a chance to bring him home in exchange for forgetting any of it had ever happened. Instead, they pulled out a syringe and vials of something and made it clear they were ready to kill me right then and there, and I knew I had to go for broke. If I was gone, I don't know what they would have done with Joyce, but I guarantee they would have left Will to rot in that place."

He paused, draining another swallow of coffee. Mike could clearly see the torment on his face as Hopper relived the memories he had spent the last four years trying to drink away.

"There was only one thing they really wanted and I knew our only chance was to give it to them. Will was going to die if we didn't get to him, so I did the only thing I could do; I told Brenner where he could find Eleven."

Mike felt his hands clench into fists, before relaxing just as fast. He wanted so desperately to hate the man, but at the same time, he was beginning to understand.

"I felt like a piece of my soul ripped in half the second the words left my lips but I knew it was the only thing I could do. But Mike, you have to believe me, I never meant for the rest of it to go down the way it did. I thought one of two things would happen. They would either get to the school and find you guys already gone, or they would take her back into the custody of the lab. If they got her, I was ready to do whatever it took to get her back out and into safety. And if, as I had hoped, you guys had all made it safely out of the school before they showed up, I was ready to leave town then and there, and get her into hiding and watch over her myself to make sure they couldn't ever get their hands on her."

They sat in silence after that, both lost in the guilt of the ways they

had failed her. It didn't change the betrayal, but knowing what had been going through Hopper's mind that night let Mike start to move toward forgiveness. In the years that followed, Mike took it on himself to check up on Hopper regularly to make sure he was occasionally eating some kind of real food and wasn't drowning in garbage. In return, the Chief was always there with a sympathetic ear for Mike to unload his own guilt and frustrations. He was also good for all the beer Mike could tolerate while they talked. As an officer of the law, providing alcohol to a minor would have been an issue, but since the city had stripped him of his title, he had no hang-ups letting the boy have as much as he wanted. In Hopper's opinion, Mike had more than earned the right to drown his own sorrows.

The visits became less frequent when Mike went off to college, and then moved down to Indianapolis to teach, but he still made time to check in on the Chief whenever he could. While he never got his life back on track, Mike helped to keep him from spiraling completely out of control. Just before the tenth anniversary of El's sacrifice, Hopper let Mike know he had been diagnosed with terminal liver cancer. The doctors gave him six months, if he could take a little better care of himself. After that, Mike made it a point to come by more often, if nothing else than for Hopper to not spend the time he had left completely alone.

When the end finally came for Jim Hopper, Mike drove up from the city to be with him. He had been declining rapidly on his last few visits, so the call from the hospital was hardly a surprise. Hopper opened his eyes long enough to give Mike a half nod when he came into the room, but fell asleep again just as fast. For almost five hours he slept and Mike wondered if death would claim the Chief before he woke again. Maybe it would be a mercy, he thought; he knew the man was in pain - in body and heart - and they had already said their goodbyes a dozen times over, just in case. However it happened, Mike vowed to remain by his side until the end, refusing to let Hopper pass his final moments alone.

A few minutes before three in the morning, Hopper opened his eyes and looked around the room with a newfound peace and calm on his face. When his eyes found Mike, they misted over, touched that the boy had stayed. He worked his lips a few times, trying to find his

voice and drawing a shallow, ragged breath.

"I'm sorry Mike. You have to find her, and tell her." He drew another breath, more labored than the last. "Tell her I'm sorry."

"I've forgiven you a long time ago, and I'm certain she has too. I'll find her and bring her home, and I'll tell her. I promise," Mike vowed once again.

Rolling his head the other way, Hopper stared off into the empty space on the far side of his hospital room. "I never meant it to happen. I'm so sorry kid."

With that last apology, he was gone, finally at peace. Once the hospital bills, funeral arrangements and other debts were paid off, there was little left of the estate of Jim Hopper, but what remained, he had left entirely to Mike to aid in his search. Among his few remaining effects was his most prized possession, which he refused to be buried with and insisted Mike keep to let him carry on in spirit.

Dusting off Hopper's hat, Mike hung it back in its place of honor on the wall.

"I'll find her, Chief," he vowed, once again. "I'll make sure she knows how sorry you were."

8. Chapter 8

Mike sat in his usual place, slumped against the cabinets in the back of the classroom. Like always, she had him held in place, keeping him safe from the demogorgon, and the dream flowed onward with its unforgiving narrative. At the front of the classroom, Eleven stared hard at the demogorgon. With tears in her eyes, she turned for one last look at Mike. In the odd reality of a dream, he could see her both through his twelve year old eyes from the back of the room, and through his thirty-three year old eyes from a detached point somewhere off to the side. Tears were falling from both of his pairs of eyes, bracing for what he knew came next.

"Goodbye, Mike," she whispered sadly, before turning again to face the creature she had pinned to the blackboard.

Bending her head low, she glared with burning red eyes and a breathed a resounding declaration. "No more."

Mike watched in agony as she reached forth with every ounce of her strength and began to tear the creature apart. The low growl in Eleven's throat grew into a fevered scream of primal rage as she ripped the molecules of the creature apart in a growing cloud of black that surrounded them. The scream grew in intensity until it filled the whole room, the lights flickering in response to the energy swirling around them. Mike braced himself for the moment when she would vanish, straining to see her one last time through the cloud of black encompassing her and the beast.

While his twelve year old self continued to watch, Mike's older, detached self began to notice something was wrong. The scream kept growing in strength, where it should be dying away. On and on, the scream grew as he watched helplessly from the sidelines. The piercing sound drove through him like a sword and he felt like his ears would start bleeding from the intensity. For twenty years, the dream had always proceeded like clockwork, but tonight everything seemed to be stuck. This time, her scream felt as though it would tear him apart too.

Finally, mercifully, Mike managed to drag himself awake but still the

scream continued ringing in his ears. His heart was racing, and a cold sweat covered him from head to toe as he lay there, fighting to catch his breath. As the scream eventually began to die away, an idea slammed into him like a freight-train. It was so obvious he began to curse himself as he shot up in bed and stumbled out into the hall. Leaving his slippers behind, Mike started down the stairs, nearly tripping twice as he ran through the kitchen and out the back door.

Stumbling barefoot across the lawn, Mike burst through the door of his workshop and dropped into the desk chair, his mind racing through the possibility. The answer made so much sense, he knew this had to be what he had been searching for all along; it was the scream. She had been giving him the answer every night for 20 years and a stab of guilt ran through him at the thought of how much sooner he could have found her, if only he had noticed what was right in front of him. He sat at the computer and for the next 45 minutes tried his best to recall as exact a memory as he could of that night, and picked out the frequency of her scream. Satisfied that he had come as close as possible, based on the memory of a night twenty years before, he set the rigs on their way searching for a match. He started them right on the number he had come up with, and let them work their way outward from there.

For the next few hours, Mike sat in eager anticipation, desperate to keep hope alive as the rigs found void after void; this portion of addresses seemed especially high in realities where Earth simply didn't exist. While the rigs did their work, Mike flipped through his journals, back to the early days of his search. He had poked a little around the verbally-accessible addresses, but his principal focus had been much higher, in the frequencies generated by her unique, beautiful mind. Since his initial theory that the gate was generated by an intricate intermingling of these signals had been correct, he had run with the assumption that it was a similar set of signals working together that set the portal in motion and completed the connection. Now, in the same way his cursed exclamation at a stubbed toe had opened one world, it seemed the terrified scream of a twelve year old Eleven had unintentionally opened the path to a far more terrifying world.

Eventually, the dialing of the rigs got to be too much for him to stay

in the little workshop. As each disk was vibrated to the desired frequency, it gave off a small mechanical hum. In this case, because of the range he was searching, each disk gave off a tiny, pained scream that tore through his heart. Standing outside, running his toes through the cold, damp grass, he cursed himself once again for missing such a crucial piece of the puzzle for so long. In truth, Eleven had unknowingly given him the answer as they walked home from the quarry after she had pulled him back up the cliff. She had described how, after finding the demogorgon in the void, she had lost all control of her powers and came back to the reality of the tank. Outside, she was vaguely aware of the sounds of the lab wall tearing open, but in her panic all she could do was scream desperately for help. Everyone in the basement had run for their lives, and it was only at the last moment that Dr. Brenner had grabbed two men and practically thrown them back into the room to get her out of the tank. Not waiting for the lift, they had pulled open the lid and hauled her, still screaming with all her might, from the water and carried her back to the upper levels of the building.

All this time, he had incorrectly assumed that, in her loss of control, she had both constructed the gate and opened the connection to the other side. Now it was becoming clear that, while her mind had constructed the doorway, it was her voice that had opened it. Days later, she had done it again, though deliberate this time. He was convinced she still hadn't been aware of how she was doing it, only that she trusted she could. She had created the doorway, opened the connection with her scream and pulled herself through, dragging the beast along with her, and slammed all the doors shut behind them. There would time later to take full stock of his blame in missing the clue; for now, he had to follow the thread as far as it would take him.

As the sunrise was just breaking pink through the windows of his workshop, the computer chimed an alert that a match had been found. Mike had to fight the urge to rip the page from the printer until it finished the job. He quickly scanned the page, feeling more hopeful with each line he read. Earth exists, it has a breathable atmosphere, cold but survivable temperatures. As his eyes passed over the photos printed near the bottom, he was overjoyed to find nothing but vines and decay. With shaking hands, he turned to the computer, ready to send a remote camera into this new world for a

closer look. He had to stop and take a deep breath, slowing himself down enough to carefully type in the destination. 0M-001K-421.0H

Behind him, the camera rig clicked and whirled to life, calling up a portal to be dialed. Mike flinched involuntarily as the thin disk vibrated at the desired frequency, establishing a connection with a perfect match for her scream, the last sound he had heard as she was torn from the world. He took another deep breath, clinging tight to the hope that all of this meant he was on the right track at last.

He waited on the edge of his seat, scarcely breathing as the camera began its job of relaying back photographs of the world on the other side of the portal. As the images began to pop up on his monitor, his eyes moved excitedly from one to the next. Dark sky, just a hint of blue. Vines and decay everywhere. Flaky white rot floating thickly through the air. Through that haze, he could make out the decaying hulk of his neighbors house. In the driveway, the neighbor's pride and joy, a cherry-red Porche, was now a rotting heap. With hesitant anticipation, Mike panned the camera away from the window and took in the room. There was his desk, his computer, the whole rack of sealed search rigs. All of them were thick with vines and sat dark and silent, but all in their proper places. He had found it. This had to be the true Upside-Down.

Grabbing the printout from desk, he raced back into the house and dressed. Now in the middle of June, classes were out for the summer and there was nothing to reschedule or work around; he would be going in today. Sitting down at the radio, he made a call, fighting to keep his excitement in check.

"Hey El, its me. Today is day 7,520. I had the nightmare again, but I noticed something new. It's been staring me in the face since that night, you showed me the way, but I never put it together. If I'm right about this...If I'm right, I think I finally know how to reach you. El, I'm so sorry I didn't see this before. I'm heading out right now, and I pray that means I'll be seeing you soon. I love you!"

He made record time getting out to the lab and less than 25 minutes after hanging up the radio, he was geared up and ready to cross over. The gate was dialed and ready as he sent the necessary email to Will.

Will,

New lead, I've been going about this all wrong; it was her scream.

OM-001K-421.OH. Out 6/15/04 07:26. Expect return by 6/17/04 18:00.

Wish me luck.

Mike

Driving through the portal, Mike made quick work of the door to the lab and headed out into the darkness. The spores were falling like snow and he had to force himself to take the drive much slower than he would have liked. Twice he had to stop and clear the accumulated gunk from the air filter, just to keep the Jeep running. As he drove, he was startled to realize that, for once, this Upside-Down was teeming with life, which only boosted both his hopes and fears ever higher. Nine agonizing hours later, he finally found himself pulling into the outskirts of Hawkins, and he knew he had a decision to make. The rational side of his brain told him he needed to stick to the normal plan and follow a proper route through town: lab, Byers, downtown, school, and finally his own basement. Sticking to the plan would be the right thing to do, and was his best hope of keeping his sanity intact if it turned out this was not the right world. His heart, meanwhile, was screaming at him that there was only one place to go: home. Somewhere inside, he knew his basement was the only place she would have gone and all the other places were just delaying the inevitable joy or heartbreak. So he had to decide, where would he go first this time?

Twenty minutes later, Mike parked the Jeep out in front of his childhood home, the place where his journey began so many years ago. He took a deep breath and steadied his heartbeat before climbing out. He had been through this enough times to know he shouldn't be getting his hopes up nearly as high as they were, but all he could do was picture walking around the corner, turning the knob on the basement door, and there she would be. Doing his best to keep his emotions in check, Mike reassured himself the machete was secure on his back before slipping an arm through the shotgun's strap and pulling it up to his shoulder. As much as he was focused on

finding El, he knew now was not the time to let his guard down.

From the front, the house looked much as it had his whole life, with the exception of two newer cars rotting in the driveway. As he made his way around to the side of the house, the what-ifs crept their way back into his head. Would she be there? Would she be okay? Would she even remember him? Twenty years is a long time, and she had only known him a few days. To survive in a place like this, she would have had plenty of other things on her mind than the boy who couldn't even protect her when it had really mattered. He fought the thoughts away with another deep breath as he looked at the corner of the house. Another step and the basement door would be in view.

He rounded the corner and was startled to find the basement door standing open. His heart stopped as he beheld the figure standing in the opening.

Demogorgon.

"A fucking demogorgon," he thought to himself as a flood of disappointment and rage washed over him. There had been a handful of worlds that had been home to cousins in the demogorgon family, complete with their leathery skin and petal-mouths lined with teeth. This was not one of the peaceful plant eaters that roamed in fields like sheep. This was not one of the coyote-like scavengers he had encountered in packs that cowered in fear as he passed. This was an original; the real deal. This was a true demogorgon in every terrible sense of the word. Not as tall as the one that had taken Eleven from him all those years ago, and yet it filled him with the same fear and hatred.

Slowly Mike started to lower the shotgun from his shoulder, careful not to provoke the creature into charging before he was ready; it was still too far away to make an effective shot. He had five rounds and he had to make them count if it decided to run at him. Curiously, it just stood there, regarding him in silence and made no move to attack. Slowly, it raised its gangly arms, grabbed two of the grotesque flaps surrounding its mouth and began to pull them back.

Scarcely believing his eyes, Mike watched in confusion as it peeled the petals of its mouth all the way back and a face emerged from

within. And just like that, there she was, much older than when he last saw her, though so was he. Her closely shaved brown hair was now long and silvery-gray, tied carefully behind her head and disappearing down the back of the demogorgon skin she wore as a cloak. His eyes were drawn to her lips and that sad, beautiful, sweet smile that he had fallen in love with as a boy. He glanced up and locked his gaze with her dark, sparkling eyes, still so full of life. It was her. It was really her.

"You came"

AN: So, of course he was going to find her. I know I have avoided the speculation when responding to reviews, not wanting to give away too much. When I was first sketching out this story, I actually did outline a version where he never found her but ultimately, I couldn't bring myself to pursue that. Mileven is a force of nature that will always find a way. Of course, finding her is only half the journey.

9. Chapter 9

Seven thousand, five hundred and twenty days.

Eleven had waited, clinging tightly to hope. She had faced starvation and dehydration. She had lived with the constant threat of creatures more fearsome than the demogorgon had ever hoped to be. She had fought and won. She had fought and lost. She had endured more than she could probably ever tell, even to Mike; he carried enough undue blame already. Through it all, she had held tight to the hope that she would be free of this place, and back with the boy she loved. Against all odds, Eleven had survived.

1983

To say she had been disoriented when she first regained consciousness in the Upside-Down would be an understatement. Trying to get back to her feet in the classroom, she couldn't recall having ever been so tired. Using her powers had always been draining, but this was something else entirely.

"Mike?" she called weakly, leaning against a wall for support. She knew she had to find him; everything would be alright if she could just find Mike. "Mike?" she called again, the panic starting to set in.

He wasn't there. Her mind couldn't process how Mike would just disappear like that; she knew he wouldn't have left her alone. Had Papa's men found him and taken him away?

"Mike?!" she called again, practically screaming his name.

It was only then that her mind started to clear enough to take notice of her surroundings. The clean walls of the school were now thick with decaying black vines. In the air hung the same white spores she had seen when she was trying to find Will and Barbara. Slowly the realization started to sink that she was now in the Upside-Down. When she had resolved to take on the creature once and for all, she had fully expected the exertion to be fatal, but it was a sacrifice she was ready to make for the people she cared about. Perhaps she had

also done it in an attempt to atone for turning the monster loose in the first place. Either way, she had thought she would either wake again in the classroom with Mike by her side, or she just wouldn't wake. But this, to now be in the place that had already claimed so many lives this week, was something she never expected.

She made a brief tour of the school, hoping beyond hope there was still a gateway open back to the world she knew. She traced her steps back from the classroom, to the place the demogorgon had torn through the wall into the hallway. Other than some cracked plaster and a bare patch in the vines, the wall was otherwise solid. Not finding what she thought she would, and with no better option, Eleven pushed her way through the front door of the school and stepped outside. There had been no lights in the school, just that faint blue glow that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at once. Outside, the darkness seemed even deeper and more foreboding, but she knew she couldn't stay where she was. Mustering her courage, and calling on every ounce of energy she had left, Eleven struck out across the unfamiliar landscape of Hawkins and made her way toward Mike and the basement and safety.

She didn't remember much after those first tentative steps beyond the school doors, and perhaps it was just as well. The mind has a funny way of blocking out those moments that would be too painful to recall, until a time it's safe to do so. Trudging through the Upside-Down, barely awake, one step at a time, she made her way back to the Wheeler's house. As she went, she continued calling Mike's name, first a shout, then a scream, and by the end, a hoarse, sobbing whisper.

The first thing she really remembered clearly was waking up in the basement, tangled in the pile of blankets that had once been her refuge. The door still sat ajar from where she had forced it open in her stupor and she had a vague recollection of having searched the house from top to bottom before finally admitting to herself that he wasn't there; she was on her own until she could figure out how to get home.

Her throat was raw, and it took several minutes of deep coughing to clear the gummy mass of spores out of her throat. Even then, the air tasted stale and did little to clear her head as she took a few

steadying breaths. Standing in the doorway and looking out across the dimly lit yard, she spotted a small pool of water in the middle of the lawn, and realized it had started raining while she was asleep. Only then did it hit her just how thirsty she was. She stumbled her way over to the pool and knelt down at its edge, dipping her hands below the cool surface. She was just raising a first sip to her parched lips when a thought stopped her; she had no idea if this water was actually drinkable, or if there was death in it like the rest of this world.

Knowing somewhere in the primitive root of her mind that she would be dead soon anyway if she didn't drink something, Eleven raised her hands to her lips and sucked down a small mouthful of the liquid. It had the same stale taste of rot as the air, and she nearly threw the first sip back up the moment she swallowed it. Fighting back her revulsion, she dipped her hands and took another sip. Though it tasted just as bad as the first, the cool liquid was refreshing and actually had the reviving effect she needed. The relief was short-lived as her stomach gave a violent growl, protesting a lack of food.

Thinking back, the last thing she had eaten was the peanut butter and jelly sandwich Mrs. Byers had fixed her while everyone was gathering supplies before they headed to the school. She had been too nervous at the time to even think about eating, but the kind woman had gently refused to take no for an answer, insisting it would make her feel better. She had been right, of course, and El couldn't help but regret turning down her offer of a second as soon as she finished the last bite of the first sandwich; what she wouldn't give to have an extra in her pocket now.

In a sudden flash of recollection, Eleven dove her hand into the pocket of Chief Hopper's jacket, which she was thankful she hadn't removed before facing off against the monster. Her fingers wrapped around the small, cold can sitting there, grateful it hadn't fallen out in all her running. Dustin had just been showing her how to pull the top off of the pudding cans when Mike had burst into the room, yelling that they had been found. Without thinking, she had stuffed the can in her pocket, freeing her hand to take a hold of Mike's as they took off down the hallway.

Walking back into the basement and out of the rain, El settled herself

back into the pile of blankets and stared for a long time at the can in her hands. Mike had called it a chocolate goo, a description which left her skeptical. She had only tried chocolate a few times, when Papa had brought her a small piece as a present. It had tasted delicious at the time, but presents from Papa also meant some new task that was going to push her abilities to the limit and leave her exhausted and in pain. Still, Dustin had been confident it would help her feel better, and Mike had assured her she would enjoy it. She knew she should be saving what could likely be the last food she had, but like the water, if she didn't find other food, the single can wouldn't make much of a difference anyway.

Slipping a finger through the pull tab, as she had watched Dustin do with his own, she pulled the lid off and stared at the dark goo inside. Dipping in a hesitant finger, she brought it to her nose and gave a little sniff. It smelled safe enough, so she touched it to her tongue. The sweet, chocolaty flavor washed through her mouth and she quickly licked the rest off her finger. A small, rare smile came to her lips and she stuck her finger back into the can for another taste. All too soon, she had consumed the full contents of the can and slid her finger very carefully around the sharp edges of the lid, desperate to get every last drop. Finally, once she had decided there was nothing left, she set the can aside and leaned back with a contented sigh. She had no idea what would happen to her, but for that brief moment, she let the peace and happiness settle around her. Her head was clearing, and she could start to make a plan. The demogorgon was dead, and that meant everyone she cared about was safe; that meant Mike was safe.

Feeling just a little better, she tried reaching out with her mind as she had done countless times before. She thought hard about Mike, every feature of his face, and tried to push her mind out into the Void to find him. As she neared that black, silent world, she suddenly found herself tumbling back to reality. She fought to catch her breath and wiped away the trickle of blood that had formed under her nose. She was sure she just needed to rest more; she had drained herself completely when she fought the demogorgon yesterday.

"Or was that two days ago?" she wondered.

She realized she had no idea just how long she had been asleep and it

might prove important to keep track of time passing. She wandered over to the far wall and cleared away the vines, leaving a wide, undisturbed surface. Picking up an old nail laying on the floor at her feet, El carved a small line into the wall; day 1.

Settling back into her nest of blankets, she was acutely aware of how tired she had gotten after just a short time awake. With one last thought of Mike, she closed her eyes and let a dreamless sleep overtake her. As she slept, small changes began to unfold in the room around her. Whatever connection existed between this world and her own, the reflections in the Upside-Down periodically brought themselves in line with their counterparts on the other side. Try as she might over the years to come, El never seemed to catch sight of the transformations as they happened, and could only puzzle at their effects afterward. This first night was subtle, with cushions returning to their place on the couch as Mike put the basement back in order and rebuilt the blanket fort. He wanted everything to be ready for the day when she came home to him. The other change was the appearance of Mike's own pillow, brought into existence in the Upside-Down as he lay down in the fort to sleep another fitful night, desperately hoping for her to find her way back.

Though neither knew it, they passed that night together among the tangle of blankets, separated by the infinity of the universe and yet mere inches apart. Both worried for the other, scared of what might lay ahead and yet knowing somewhere deep in their soul, they would find each other. Somehow. Someday.

10. Chapter 10

It was still fully dark when Eleven awoke early the next morning, hours before the return of the faint blue glow that would come to mark the passage of her days. Feeling much better than she had the day before, she sat in the stillness of the basement and tried to soak in the world around her. The rain had slowed to a gentle pattering against the window. A light wind could be heard rustling the branches of a nearby tree. Beyond that, nothing but silence reached her ears as she made plans for the day.

She knew there were only a few things she really needed if she was going to survive in this place for any length of time. The rain was providing enough water to get by for now, and if it came down to it, El was fairly certain she could find her way back to the pond where she had passed the night after she lost control and threw Lucas. She knew she could find her way back to the quarry too, though the walk was much farther. As for shelter, the basement was filling that role just fine, and she saw no reason that would change any time soon. That left the matter of food. She had faced hunger before, as punishment back in the lab for failing one of Papa's tests, but that had never been longer than two days. Will had survived for a week in this place, so maybe there was something edible here after all.

In a flash of worry, she suddenly remembered that Will might still be in the Upside-Down as well, along with the Chief and Mrs. Byers. With a guilt sinking in at the thought she might have imprisoned all of them in this place, she tried pushing her mind out to find them. Being much more recovered from her showdown with the demogorgon, El was able to easily get her mind into the void and start looking for the people she cared about. Though she didn't want to face the awful sight again, she started by trying to find Barb, knowing she would be in the same place as before and would ensure she could find people from this side. Sure enough, her remains quickly pulled into focus and El had to fight back the guilt and revulsion before they tumbled her mind back out. Quickly, she switched her thoughts through the other three, first Will, then his mother, and finally to Chief Hopper. Much to her relief, she couldn't find any of them, which she could only assume meant they made it

back out before the gates pulled shut.

Her relief was short lived and washed quickly away as the reality of her situation came rushing back; she really was all alone. As her mind returned to the basement, El gave her head a hard shake, fighting back the tears burning at the corners of her eyes. There would be time enough for that later, but for now, she had to get situated. While she waited for the day-glow, as she came to regard it, she made a mental list of how she would pass the day.

- 1) Find food: anything nutritious that she could keep down.
- 2) Collect water: store some now while it's available to get through the times when it might not be.
- 3) Check the yard for any signs of other creatures that might call this world home and may be a threat or a food.
- 4) Try to reach Mike.

There was comfort in having a plan, simple though it was, and it carried her through the final hour of the night. As light came back into the world, El stood from her pile of blankets and walked back to the space she had cleared on the wall and added a little line for day 2. Braving another climb up the basement stairs, she started her investigation of the kitchen. During her brief stay at the Wheeler home, Mike had taken her to the kitchen several times to find something to eat. With everything else in this world that seemed to mirror her own, she hoped something edible might be found. It became obvious immediately that nothing in the refrigerator or freezer was still suitable for human consumption; little could even be recognized for the food it had once been. The cupboards proved a little more promising. Foods in boxes rarely turned out better than what had been in the fridge, but once she found her way through the ends of the cans, several items still smelled safe enough to give a tentative chance.

Gathering the few cans that seemed worth a try, Eleven carried them back down to the basement and placed them on the small table next to the couch. Climbing up to the kitchen again, she grabbed a handful of silverware so she wouldn't have to risk digging her fingers past the sharp metal edges of the cans, and the biggest pot she could find to hold a supply of water. As she started for the steps once more, she turned back and grabbed the two biggest knives she could find

and added those to her collection. After a trip outside to the pond in the grass to gather a pot of water, she settled back on the couch to try out her finds. The vegetables were practically mush and despite smelling alright, she could barely choke down a single spoonful before pushing the can aside. The chili and beef stew were only slightly better, but they were enough to actually leave her feeling the welcome relief of a full stomach. The food was by no means pleasant, but if it kept her alive, she was happier for it.

With a full stomach, she ventured out of the basement again to explore, first around the yard and then through the house itself. Outside, the rain had finally come to a stop and the world was eerily quiet. No sounds betrayed the presence of creatures who might be lurking in the shadows just beyond the yard. As she cautiously circled the house, she kept one of the kitchen knives clenched tightly in her fist and strained her eyes to catch the slightest signs of movement.

Satisfied she was alone for now, El made her way back inside and made another tour through the Wheeler house, keeping her eyes peeled for any signs of danger and gathering anything she thought might be useful to keep close at hand down in the basement. It felt strange wandering the silent home, retracing the steps she had taken just days before while Mike was at school. Everything seemed to be in the same places as they were before, just dirtier and older. As she looked around Nancy's room, she found herself drawn once more to the music box with the little dancer inside. Brushing away the vines growing around the box, she lifted it free and raised the lid. The sound was a little more muted than the last time, but the same soft melody tinkled away as the dancer slowly spun.

For a few minutes, all she could do was stand and stare at the box held gently in her hands. As the melody unwound, her mind wandered over everything that happened in just a few days. She had left behind all she knew, a life of isolation and abuse in the lab, and found her way into the real world. She had found people she cared about, and who genuinely cared about her in return. She had experienced just the smallest taste of what a normal life was supposed to be, and now it had all been torn away again. All she could think was how unfair it all felt, not even really knowing if the world was supposed to be fair in the first place. She pulled back into

reality as a choking sob caught in her throat, and she quickly slammed the lid on the box.

"Not now," she whispered to herself.

Still carrying the music box, she moved on to Mike's room to see what she might need from there too. Standing in the middle of the room, she turned slowly, taking it all in. She had only been up to his room a couple times during those brief days, but it had somehow felt like home. Even now, trapped and alone in the darkness of the Upside-Down, she could almost feel his presence beside her. As her eyes came back around to the door, Eleven spotted what she had been looking for. On the dresser, behind a tangle of vines, was the loose photograph of Mike and the others when they won the science fair. Carefully pulling the snapshot free, she had to fight back another sob; she had never even had a chance to ask Mike what a science fair was. Still, looking at his smiling face, she couldn't help but feel a small grin tugging at the corners of her mouth.

Tucking the photograph carefully into the music box, she looked around again, settling on what all she wanted to bring downstairs. Moving from room to room, El gathered up any blankets she could find, pulling them free of their respective beds, and towed them all down to the basement. She had been tired enough the last couple nights to not notice the cold but today it began to seep deep inside her and she wanted as many layers as she could find to cocoon herself at night. Returning to Mike's room, she wrestled the mattress off the lower bunk of his bed and shoved it through the door and into the hallway. Scanning the room one more time, her gaze fell on Mike's hooded sweatshirt hanging off a peg on the wall. She hadn't remembered seeing the jacket a few minutes before when she inspected the room, but brushed it off as an oversight. Pulling it carefully off the hook, El slipped her arms into the sweatshirt and pulled it over her head. True, it was cold and she needed her hands free to haul the mattress down two flights of stairs to the basement. If she was really honest with herself, though, she wanted it on because in some small way it felt like his arms were around her again, holding her close and telling her everything would be alright.

Back in the basement, she took a break from all her gatherings to try another can from the kitchen. This one was rectangular and had a

pull-tab on the top, just like the pudding. Slipping in a finger and giving the lid a gentle pull, she was surprised to find the contents in good condition. It appeared to be a solid block of slightly pink meat. Holding the can close to her nose, she was amazed to find the contents didn't have any of the smell of rot she had already started to become used to. Instead, this one only smelled of salt. Scooping out a chunk with her fork, she carefully chewed the bite. The slimy texture left something to be desired, but it was the closest thing to real, familiar food she had found so far. She quickly dug in for another bite, turning the can over in her hands as she chewed, and sounded out the yellow letters on the blue label: SPAM.

Her hunger put to rest again, El spent the rest of the day shifting boxes and furniture around the basement, clearing space to setup her makeshift bed where the fort had been. As much as she hated taking apart the special place Mike had made just for her, she knew she needed a proper place to stretch out and sleep to regain her strength. Whenever she had been drained to the point of exhaustion in the lab, Papa had ordered her to several days of bed-rest to recover. While she hated the tests that led to such orders, she had found some small enjoyment in those days. Being allowed to sleep late, getting up long enough to eat or to color at her desk, and then being allowed to climb back in bed to sleep; she had almost been happy on those days. Of course, that would all come to an end when Papa needed her to start training and testing again. She knew, even this time, there would be exhaustion and struggle once she was fully recovered. At least this time, it would be on her own terms and for her own goal. She would strengthen and train until she could get the gate open and get herself back home and back to Mike.

There was still a dim glow in the sky as El settled onto the mattress, still wrapped snugly in Mike's jacket, and pulled the pile of blankets around herself. Rolling onto her side, she lifted the lid on the music box and set the dancer into her slow twirl. Picking up the photograph, she leaned it against the side of the box.

"Goodnight Mike," she whispered as she watched his smiling face staring back at her.

Minutes later, sleep overtook her as the music unwound and came to a gentle stop.

11. Chapter 11

Eleven woke with a start, eyes blinking hard against the darkness around her, trying to figure out where she was. Her room in the lab always had a dim light on, even in the middle of the night, and Mike had made sure there was light in the basement for her as well. It took a moment, but reality finally started to return to her mind as sleep faded away. Sitting in the quiet, she struggled to figure out what had snapped her awake so suddenly. She was pretty sure she hadn't been dreaming; she had been too tired and too deeply asleep for that.

As she puzzled about what it had been, she heard a noise upstairs, coming from the kitchen on the first floor. At first, it was just a gentle scratching, like something small being dragged across the ground. Reaching out slowly, careful not to make any noise herself, El felt gingerly around next to the bed until her fingers wrapped securely around the handle of one of the large kitchen knives.

"It's the demogorgon," she thought, as her heart began hammering in her chest. "I didn't kill it after all. And now it's found me."

She squeezed her eyes tightly shut, listening as hard as she could to the sounds mere feet above her head. Suddenly, a series of loud thuds thundered through the silent house as whatever was in the kitchen knocked over several of the open cans she had left on the counter and pushed them onto the floor. While she had been searching for something edible, she had just pushed the rejected cans off to the side to be dealt with later, an action she now deeply regretted. The cans were followed by a gentler thump as whatever was exploring the kitchen plopped down on the floor among the spilled cans.

Reassured that whatever was up there was much too small to be the demogorgon, Eleven allowed herself to breathe again, her heart slowing just a little. Still, she had no idea whether the creature rooting through her rejected meals posed any kind of a threat. Pulling the blankets tight around herself and gripping the knife tight in her fist, El quietly pulled herself into a seated position on the mattress and waited for the day-glow. All the while, she listened to the soft scrapings as the creature pushed cans around the kitchen floor, apparently enjoying the taste of its discovery. Sitting in the dark, she

cursed herself for not getting rid of the cans before going to bed, though she wouldn't have had any way to know that oversight would draw in scavengers. If there was one positive to be found, she at least knew there were other things alive in this world.

When the glow mercifully returned, El allowed herself to finally relax. She was almost positive she had heard the creature scurry its way back up onto the counter and after a few more minutes of scrambling around, the whole house was silent again. She hoped that meant it had left the same way it came in. Mustering all the courage she had left, El slowly crept up the stairs and paused by the door, listening hard for any sounds. Hearing none, she carefully twisted the knob, opening the door as quietly as she could. Stepping slowly around the corner and into the kitchen, knife held at the ready, she was relieved to see she was alone. The floor was a mess, with the scattered and spilled remains of her rejected cans smeared across the tile. Stepping carefully through the mess, she was surprised to find clear paw-prints from whatever the creature had been, marking its struggled climb back onto the counter and then up into the window-sill over the sink where it had slipped out through a broken pane of glass. The prints were small, and the opening in the window not much bigger than her hand with the fingers spread wide, so whatever it had been was very small and probably not a threat. Still, she knew she had to take better precautions against attracting attention like that.

While she had hoped to spend the day resting, Eleven spent the entirety of her third day in the Upside-Down making her refuge as secure as she possibly could. Finding a bag under the kitchen sink, she gathered the remains of every open can and tossed them inside. To that, she added several towels she found in the upstairs closet, which she had used to wipe down every trace of food smeared around the kitchen. Pausing just long enough to grab one of her knives, she hauled the bag out the back door and started down the street. Deciding three houses away was far enough, she tossed the bag back into the trees where the creatures of this world could scavenge to their hearts content. Not enjoying being this exposed, wandering around outside, El still resolved she would never keep open food laying around the house again.

Back inside the relative safety of the house, she began to check every door and window to determine where things could find their way in. The front door, and the one down in the basement, felt secure enough. The windows, on the other hand, left her uneasy. It had only taken one look at the broken shards over the sink to realize just how easily something could find its way through. Looking around the basement again, she came to a quick decision; this space was hers and the creatures of this world were welcome to the rest of the house. Starting in the kitchen, she gathered the rest of the canned goods, a few bowls and plates and the rest of the sharp knives. Hauling her provisions back into the basement, she decided to put away her stores in the bathroom, since the fixtures had turned out to be useless.

Upstairs again, she went room to room, gathering whatever else she felt would serve her any use. From the mantle, she tucked Mike's school picture under her arm and started up the stairs to scour the bedrooms one more time. Throwing open Mike's closet door, she suddenly realized part of why she had been feeling so cold; for the last three days she hadn't thought to change out of Nancy's old pink dress, now smudged and stained by the grime of the Upside-Down. Rummaging through the shirts and jackets hanging carefully in the closet, and then digging through his dresser, El gathered a supply of clothes to last for a while. In time, she thought, she might need more but they would still be right here.

Turning to leave, she noticed Mike's backpack hanging on the same hook she had pulled the sweatshirt from the day before. Realizing it must have mirrored the real world, just as his pillow had the day before, El grabbed it quickly and clutched it to her chest, thankful for the reminder that he was still close by in his own way. It would take a few months before she began to work out the rules behind the mirroring, but she would come to find that the more she disrupted a location, the less things would copy over and adjust, until they stopped all together. In this case, Mike's backpack, hastily hung as he dejectedly returned from a day at school, was the last piece of his world to copy over within the walls of the Wheeler house.

After changing into several warmer layers, El looked around the basement and decided it was time to close herself in. Moving the

mattress and blankets over to one corner, and bringing over the small table from its place next to the couch, she began hauling everything else up to the main floor of the house. The boxes were easy enough and she used each for several trips, dumping the contents in the hallway before tossing them back down stairs to be refilled. Once it came time for the bigger pieces, like the couch, she dipped into the strength she had regained and hauled them up the stairs by sheer mental will. Looking around the basement, empty of everything but the things she had deemed essential, she climbed the stairs and closed the door at the top. The couch from the basement, as well as the couch and chair from the living room, were piled in front of the doorway, blocking the entrance. All the smaller items she brought up and anything else close at hand, were heaped on top until she was satisfied nothing could make it through without giving her plenty of warning.

Walking back into the kitchen, she opened the door on the pantry and studied the screws holding the hinges on the wall. With a quick flick of her head, the door ripped free and clattered to the floor at her feet. Picking it up with a combination of her arms and her mind, she hauled the sturdy panel out the front door and around the side of the house, her route down the stairs thoroughly blocked. After securing the wood in place across the basement window, she returned to the main floor of the house one last time. After a quick look around the vacant space, she pulled the door shut and locked it with a flick of her head as she walked away.

Securely closed into her sanctuary downstairs, El set about arranging her things in the now empty space. As much as she tried to tell herself it was ridiculous to be putting this much effort into setting up a makeshift home, she couldn't shake the feeling she might be stuck for more than a few days. She had been running it over in her mind all day as she worked, but she still had no idea just how she had pulled the portal open that day in the lab, or pulled things closed again as she fought the demogorgon. She reasoned she would just have to give it a try once she was strong enough and see what happened.

Day four finally brought her the rest she so desperately needed. No visitors found their way into the floors above her in search of food. Through the day she was able to remain in bed, napping and

regaining her strength. She woke at first light, long enough to scratch a fourth tally mark into the wall and nibble on some breakfast, before crawling back into the warm embrace of the blankets. After the light had fled the world that night, plunging the basement into darkness once more, she decided she felt well enough to try reaching out for Mike again.

It took a lot to push her mind across the boundary between his world and her own, but eventually she made it. A flood of warmth ran through her as his face came into focus in the void and she recognized immediately where he was. The blanket fort he had kicked down in anger when she ran away had been lovingly reconstructed, and he was now sitting inside. In his lap he held the SuperComm, listening intently to the static as he slowly turned the dial back and forth across the frequencies. Her heart broke just looking at it face, deeply etched with pain; he looked like he probably hadn't slept in days.

"Not since the last time we saw each other," she thought.

Suddenly, with a fresh look of determination, he raised the radio and pressed the button on the side, hesitating before he spoke, pausing between each question.

"El? Are you there? Eleven?"

He paused, releasing the transmit button and letting the sound of static fill the room again. She slowly knelt before his image, scarcely breathing, terrified of breaking the connection she fought so hard to build.

"Today is Thursday, November 17th. It's been four days now since you went away. I don't know if you can hear me or not, but I want you to know, I'm here. I'm still here." He took a shaky breath, trying to hold himself together. "They keep trying to tell me you're gone, and that you're not coming back. But I know you're still out there somewhere. I can't explain it, but I can just feel you, like you're still right here. I know it's not safe yet, but soon, please come home. Until then, please, just give me a sign you're out there."

He dropped the radio to his lap again, shaking his head in frustration

as he gathered his thoughts. "I'm sorry, I know I'm probably rambling, I just really need you. As long as it takes, I'll be right here. I know you're very far away right now, but I'll call you every night, and you can follow my voice home. Until then, keep yourself safe. I miss you."

Releasing the transmit button again, he let the sound of static envelop him, straining to pick up the slightest hint she was reaching out to him. His message complete, Mike let out a shuddering breath and allowed the tears to finally come. He couldn't understand how it was possible, having known her only a few days, to now feel as though his world would never be right again without her.

Tears streamed down Eleven's face as she watched the one person she cared about more than anything, falling apart in front of her. She knew what would happen as she slowly reached a hand forward, but she had to try all the same.

"Mike. I'm here," she whispered, placing her fingers gently against his cheek. She was certain she felt the briefest moment of warmth on her fingertips before his image began to turn fuzzy and she found her mind tumbling back to the cold reality of her basement.

Sitting once more in the darkness, a fresh wind howling outside her little refuge, El finally gave in to the grief she had been forcing down for the last few days. She cried for the childhood she had unknowingly lost in the lab. She cried through the guilt of setting the demogorgon loose on the world, and everyone who had been hurt in the process. She grieved for the world she had found outside the lab, and the people she cared about, and how little time she had gotten to know either. Lastly she sobbed out her longing for Mike, desperate to find her way back to him. She couldn't explain the feeling, but she knew she cared for him far deeper than anyone else she had ever known. She thought that feeling was what Mike had been trying to explain during their last quiet moment together back in the school.

When no more tears came, El wiped the soft sleeve of Mike's jacket across her raw cheeks, and was surprised to find she actually felt just a little better. Her heart still ached to be home in the world where she belonged, but she knew somehow this confinement would only be temporary. She had created and destroyed the portals before and she would figure it out again. In the meantime, Mike wasn't giving up on

her, so she wasn't giving up either.

In the weeks to follow, Eleven tried again and again to pull open a portal back to the real world. Each try brought nothing but exhaustion and disappointment and it became clear her powers just weren't as strong here. While she never gave up on finding an opening to get home, she had to conserve her strength for the dangers of the Upside-Down.

As the presence of the demogorgon faded, other creatures returned to the area. Some were small and not a threat, like the one that had found its way into the kitchen. But others soon followed, larger and far more dangerous, and fighting for the same rare bits of food. Meat was scarce, and quite often unpleasant, but it kept her strength up. The vines were filling enough when there was nothing better around.

She scavenged real food when she could, raiding cupboards in houses as far out as she dared. That was always a calculated move, as disrupting the shelves kept new things from copying over when she left. As hard as it got sometimes, she forced herself to wait until things were bad before she would choose a new house to enter.

A few years in, another demogorgon came through the area, smaller than the first but just as dangerous. In the days before it came, most of the creatures of the woods disappeared almost overnight; only the largest predators sticking around. In the end, it was the giant spiders that stalk the forests in the night that finished off the beast. While they normally ate the foulest of meats, whatever they killed in the darkness, even the spiders wouldn't touch the meat of the demogorgon. In a flash of inspiration, Eleven decided to skin the creature that had destroyed her life and turn it into a cloak for when she ventured outside. If most animals fled from the real demogorgon, she hoped her cloak would keep them at bay. For the most part, she was right, but in times of scarcity, even the weakest of prey became bold and dangerous.

There was another creature stalking the Upside-Down, far worse than demogorgons, or spiders, or anything else creeping the woods at night. She only saw it a few times, and knew on instinct she had to stay in hiding until it left Hawkins. The monster was huge, towering high above the trees, and seemed to be made more of smoke than

flesh. Whatever it was, when the lightning-storms announced its arrival, she closed herself in and walled up the basement door, kept her fire extinguished and huddled in her blankets for however long it took to leave. Sometimes it would stay away for years at a time, others it would return after only weeks, but always it seemed to be searching. She could almost feel the thing in the back of her mind, and she knew better than to seek it out, knowing it would sense her connection.

Months turned to years and the basement walls slowly filled with tally marks, a fresh line etched each morning when the glow returned to the sky. Life fell into routines of gathering, resting and generally keeping alive. She was able to find enough food to get by, but rarely was there enough to stay comfortable. Mostly, she waited. Whenever she could, she reached out and found Mike - her lifeline and her sanity. While her heart broke for him and all that he put himself through to get to her, it gave her the strength to hold on. There were days she was just too weak to find him. On the days he stepped out of his own world and into another to search for her, she couldn't make a connection. Those days were the hardest, knowing he was someplace dangerous, searching for her, and knowing that if she couldn't make a connection, it meant he was in the wrong world to find her. But always she would find him again, and know it would be alright. He was coming for her; he had promised, and Mike Wheeler didn't break promises.

Day 7520 began like every other. Her nightly vigil keeping watch for the creatures that hunted in the darkness drew to a close and she was just getting ready to settle in to sleep for a few hours. In the back of her mind, she felt an unconscious tugging. She never had an explanation for where it came from, but she knew it usually meant Mike was reaching out for her; just another in a long line of inexplicable links joining them. Tired as she was, she reached out and found him in his bedroom, seated familiarly at the radio calling out to her. He seemed to be buzzing with excitement and she barely caught the last of his message:

"...and I pray that means I'll be seeing you soon. I love you!"

She watched as he switched off the radio and hurried about the

room, dressing for another trip through the portal. She recognized his excitement and let it seep into her own mind, though she tried to keep it contained. She had watched him countless times before, excitedly heading off to find her, and it broke her heart to see how utterly destroyed he was when he came back from those unsuccessful trips.

When she could no longer hold the connection, she let her mind come back to the reality of the basement. She knew there was nothing she could do now but wait and hope. She settled into the nest of blankets and slept, resting a little longer than normal after her extra expenditure of energy finding Mike. Hours later, when she pulled herself out of sleep and started preparing for the day, she couldn't help but wonder and worry how the hunt was going for him. Sometimes he was already back home a few hours after going in, when the world turned out to be an impossible match. While she knew she should be going out to gather vines and whatever else she could scavenge, she couldn't help but take a moment to check on him.

She sent her mind out, pushing hard to reach across the boundary between their worlds and preparing for the heartbreak that would come from either finding him, knowing he had failed, or not, and knowing he was still searching in a world where he would find nothing but more disappointment. Though her abilities had grown strong over the years, it was still an effort to get across the divide and reach him. That's why, as she started out, she was startled so badly she almost broke the connection when Mike instantly resolved before her in the blackness of the void. He was driving along in his Jeep, a stony look of tired determination plastered on his face. At first, all she could see around him was darkness, but slowly other features began to take shape, revealing the world around him. Instead of the clean, lively world she was used to when she found him, he was driving through an all-too-familiar landscape of vines and swirling white spores. Though she could scarcely believe it possible, she knew this had to mean he was in her world - her Upside-Down.

Her mind began to race, and the connection fell away. She was pleased to find that she wasn't as drained reaching across her own world as she was when she would send her mind out to his. An odd,

fluttery feeling came over her as she looked around the basement and immediately set about tidying up. She always kept things neat and organized anyway - a lasting remnant of her earliest days in the lab when Papa had insisted on cleanliness and order - but she found herself giving the whole space a once-over. She started a fire to drive out the chill that had settled across the space. She picked up the blankets in her little nest and folded each, stacking them neatly to one side. Her stomach filled with butterflies as she looked around, trying desperately to find something else to distract herself.

Finally, when she could stand it no longer, she sat down in front of the fire and reached her mind out to find him again. He was so close she could practically feel him. She fought hard to keep the doubts from her mind. There was still always a chance she had simply strengthened her abilities enough to finally reach him in the other worlds he searched; it could all still end in disappointment. She noticed with more than a little apprehension that the sky was already beginning to give way to twilight. If Mike was actually in her world, all the dangers of the night would be coming out soon and she found herself urging him onward. For almost 20 minutes, she sat quietly in the void, waiting and watching as Mike drove ever closer to town and into his old neighborhood.

After years of cautious practice, El had trained herself to come back to reality at the slightest sound outside the safety of her basement. More often than not, the sound signaled either an animal on the hunt or prey on the run, and both meant she needed to be ready to defend herself. The distant rumble that finally drew her out of the void was not one she had heard before, but she knew at once it had to be Mike. Crossing quickly to the door, she pulled on her demogorgon cloak, more from habit than necessity. She stepped out onto the back step and looked expectantly toward the front of the house.

Her heart pounded with anticipation at the impending moment when she would see him again. All at once, there he was; the face she had sought out in the darkest moments of the night and the furthest depths of her dreams. She pulled up short as she took in the expression on his face. She had expected him to be as overjoyed at their reunion as she was, but only anger and hate painted his normally soft features. Only as he began to lower the gun from his

shoulder did it dawn on her just what she was wearing. The cloak so hastily donned as she stepped out the door hid all features of the girl he meant to find and left him seeing only the creature that had torn her away in the first place.

Moving slowly, not wanting to startle Mike into any hasty action, El slowly raised her arms and pulled back the mouth flaps she had fashioned into a hood. As her face came into full view, she was delighted to find the anger drain from his face and after passing briefly through confusion and realization, his mouth pulled up into a smile. She stood for a moment just taking him in, still scarcely believing he had finally come, before a smile tugged at the corners of her lips as well.

He promised he would come for her, and he had come.

Seven thousand, five hundred and twenty days.

Eleven had survived.

12. Of Monsters and Portals

Of Monsters and Portals

In answering a question asked in a recent review (big thanks author carrymehome for sparking this), I found myself going into a detailed explanation of how I had reasoned out the science behind the gates/portals and how El accidentally closing one shut them all down. I've decided to post those details here as a bit of a supplemental chapter for others that may be interested in a more technical explanation of the rules I have been following through this story.

If you don't really have an interest in the technical science(fiction...so very much fiction) behind this, feel free to skip this chapter. None of the narrative will be furthered here, and the story-proper will pick back up in the next chapter.

For those sticking around, here are the rules I have been playing by, based on what we have been given in the show (S1 and S2), and details I have added in to build a more complete picture. I'm sure my framework still has more holes than a block of Swiss cheese, and I expect S3 will punch even more tunnels right through that.

Many Worlds

There are an infinite (or nearly so) number of universes, each existing as slight variations of one another. These realities all exist in the same three physical dimensions, as well as the same time dimension. In some higher dimension, these worlds are stacked in such a way that the same physical/time point in each universe is touching the same point in each of the others, allowing a connection to be made between them.

Imagine our universe is a single sheet of paper, because that's everyone's favorite tool for visualizing these sorts of things. Now imagine a second sheet of paper, nearly identical in every possible way, except for some tiny change in one corner. Stack up these two sheets so the edges all line up neatly. Now place these two pages on a stack of infinitely more, near identical pages. If you were to poke a

tiny hole down through the stack, you would connect the same location in every universe. The exact contents of that location may be different in each world - you might hit Hawkins or you might wind up out in space - but you will hit the same point in physical space and time in each universe. One more tiny stretch, imagine that the stack of pages is constantly shuffling, so that each page is effectively right next to every other page.

Portals Between

Because of the nature of the infinite universes, any point in our world is immediately adjacent to that same point and time in every other. This allows a properly constructed gateway to connect any two worlds and provide passage between. Because these portals exist in the same point in physical space, passing through this doorway is instantaneous to the traveler, used to perceiving their world in three physical dimensions and a constant flow of time. In reality, they have also crossed a tremendous distance in the dimension where the worlds stack together. This last distance is what affects the effort required to join two points into an active tunnel, and will be discussed further when we talk about monsters and Eleven, who is most definitely not a monster.

Pairing Up

Creating a gateway between any two worlds starts with a potential portal. Through a perfect blending of electromagnetic fields, a portal is created, ready to be connected with another world. We saw this created in a very rough, unfocused fashion when El lost control of her powers in the lab and in a clean, refined form by Mike in the basement with the unyielding disk. By the nature of the stacked universes, this portal has technically been created in every world, but is solid and disconnected in each. At this point, the opening is still waiting to be dialed, connecting it to a particular world and allowing the traveler to pass.

This is where the vibrations of the portal come into play. Each pair of worlds has a resonant frequency that connects them together. Lets return to our stack-of-paper multiverse. Imagine we now have sheets of heavy plastic, stretched tight in a frame, in the middle of each piece of paper, and a tiny gap of air between the pages. Tapping the

plastic on the top page will send a vibration down through the stack, causing each other piece of plastic to similarly vibrate. The exact frequency induced on each will be affected by the distance and number of pages between them and the originally tapped page. In this setup, exactly one other piece of plastic will wind up resonating with the exact frequency as the original, and those are the two ends that will open to one another and allow passage.

While the same frequency will always connect two worlds from either side, other frequencies will make different pairings depending on where they are dialed from (addressed, but not a spoiler, later in this story). For example, let's imagine World A and World B are paired by a frequency of 1. Similarly, World A and World C are paired by a frequency of 2. However, if one were to make a connection from World B with a frequency of 2, you might wind up at World D instead. Meanwhile, World A has to use a frequency of 2317 to reach World D. The precise rules around these pairings was at the heart of Mike's search.

Tunnels Running Deep

While Mr. Clarke may have overestimated the energy required to open a portal, it is still no an easy task. While the physical separation between the two ends of a tunnel are virtually non-existent, there is a great distance to be crossed in the higher dimension. In my opinion, El is the only one so far that has the native ability to create these connections herself. I believe the openings created by the demogorgon, and those expanded by the mind-flayer, were making use of the main tunnel already established by El; more on that in a minute. Mike, of course, worked out how to mechanically reproduce the effect, but that in no way diminishes what El is able to do. In the same way mankind has figured out how to build airplanes, that takes nothing away from birds who can achieve flight completely unassisted.

This will come into play in just a moment, when discussing the creatures of the Upside-Down, but picture the space between two portal openings as a long tunnel bored through solid rock under a mountain. Difficult to construct, it is ultimately a stable passageway once complete. However, with the right conditions, it can be collapsed upon itself.

Monsters

For all their fearsome strength and menacing face that is nothing but mouth and teeth, I think the demogorgon is ultimately a low-intelligence predator. In S1, we are shown a single creature clawing its way into Hawkins and leaving havoc in its wake. However, all we really see the creature doing is hunting its next meal. On its own, I don't believe the demogorgon has any telekinetic abilities to assist in the creation of portals to pull itself across dimensions. Instead, it is the influence of the mind-flayer on an infected host that gave the demogorgon the ability to create offshoot portals.

The mind-flayer seems to be the Upside-Down creature with the most ability when it comes to telekinetics. It exerted control over Will and the demogorgon army in S2, but even then, it appeared to struggle when it came to portals. While it managed to expand the existing portal in the lab, it was unable to bring itself across until El began working to close the gate for good.

Going back to our rock-tunnel example, I think neither the mind-flayer, nor a demogorgon under its influence, was capable of creating a full connection. Instead, they could only create short offshoots off the completed gateway already opened by El, emerging just a few miles from the original rift in the lab. If our tunnel in the mountain were several miles long, this would be the equivalent of drilling a tiny tube off to the side, connecting just inches inside the opening. And given the understanding above that portals resolve in the same place in every universe, creating this offshoot makes a matched opening on each end. It was a new one of these offshoots that El inadvertently created as she destroyed the demogorgon and wound up in the Upside-Down version of the classroom.

Given the idea that all the openings that came in went throughout S1 and S2 were just offshoots of the main gate El originally opened, I hold that closing down the actual tunnel itself would effectively close off all openings that had been branched. In the case of this story, since she collapsed the connection on her way through, all of the doorways back to Hawkins would have been closed in that same moment. Her new offshoot in the classroom, the portal in the school hallway, any that might have still be in existence in the Byers' home and the original lab opening, all would shut down together.

Inter-dimensional Photocopier

Let's call this one magic, to refer to science we just don't understand enough yet, but here is a basic idea. Going back to our example of a stack of paper, let's imagine you have a felt-tip marker and you're drawing something on the top page. As long as you keep the pen moving, the worlds below are left unaffected. However, once you bring the pen to rest, ink can begin to seep through and mark the adjacent worlds. I believe objects have to be at rest for a period of time before they copy over based on a few facts from the show. In S1E8, after the demogorgon is torched in the Byers' hallway, the bear trap is still nailed down in the hallway in our world. However, when Hopper and Joyce inspect that same spot in the Upside-Down, the trap isn't there, only the bloodstains where it pulled itself back through. On the other hand, in S2, we see cars parked on the street (presumably for several hours) and the dance decorations at the school, which have been in place long enough to mirror across.

Imperfect Portals

Portals created in the middle of walls will have a damaging effect on the solid matter around them. This leads to splintering and bowing while the portal is active. The way damaged surfaces can repair themselves after the fact, I can only explain as an artifact of the copy-over effect, perhaps enhanced by the lingering remains of the former connection.

Portals created organically, by mental will, can be subject to imperfections not found in a mechanically generated opening. If the resonance between two endpoints isn't exact, the portal may maintain a film that must be broken through. If the imperfection is small, the resistance may be broken through by hand (S2E2). If the imperfection is greater, the portal may resist nearly all force applied to it, and allow only muted sound and visible light through, acting more as a window than a passage way (S1E4).

As I said, I'm sure this is still full of plenty of holes, but it is the general framework I have been working from.

13. Chapter 12

"You came," she said in a deep, husky voice, ravaged by years of breathing foul Upside-Down air.

"Eleven?" Mike asked, still in disbelief, "Is that really you?"

He took a tentative step forward, relief starting to course through his veins. Mirroring his movements, Eleven stepped forward, drawn to him like a magnet. With each step they moved faster, quickly closing the distance until at long last she threw her arms around him, burying her face in his chest. He folded her into his arms as their collective tears began to fall. Twenty years of heartache and pain, searching and waiting, worrying and wondering flooded down their faces as they held one another.

The day she disappeared, Mike felt like his whole life had come to a crashing halt. There had been days he wasn't sure he even had the strength left in him to go on. Standing there in the darkness of the Upside-Down, surrounded by death and decay, he pulled a shaky, ragged breath and felt his life begin again.

Neither could say just how long they stood there, afraid to let go for fear the other would vanish again like some fevered dream. Finally, Mike reluctantly loosened his grip and El pulled back just far enough to look deep into his eyes, so full of pain and relief.

"I'm so sorry," he began, heart still full of guilt. "I'm sorry it took me so long to find my way to you."

Freeing an arm from the leathery confines of the demogorgon skin, she gently pressed one hand to the side of his face. "Mike," she whispered, her voice soft and hoarse. It was a single syllable, but then she had never been one for lengthy speeches. That one word spoke volumes and he understood what she meant behind it. She didn't blame him and she didn't want him blaming himself; if anything, she blamed herself for all that had happened. She knew he would keep his promise, and she would have waited as long as it took.

There was so much to be said, so many questions he had running through his mind, but Mike knew it wasn't quite time. He still needed to get her safely back to Indianapolis and close the doorway into this cursed world for good. It had been obvious throughout the drive to Hawkins that this version of the Upside-Down was teeming with life, and anything that could survive in this place was a force to be reckoned with. Of course, that included Eleven, but he was determined to keep her from having to fight for her survival any longer.

"I've come to take you home," he offered, gently.

"Home?" She chewed on the word for a minute, remembering the last time he had made her the offer and how hard he had fought since then to keep his promise. A smile swept over her lips as she repeated the word her heart had longed for. "Home."

He smiled back, eager to deliver on the promises he had made to her years before. "We can go whenever you're ready. Now, if you want."

A shadow of doubt crossed her face as she she looked at the sky before answering. "Not now. Not safe. Night soon. Spiders coming."

As anxious as Mike was to put this place behind them, he bowed to her wisdom. This was her world, and if El said it wasn't safe to make the trip at night, he wasn't about to argue.

"Okay, we'll stay here for the night," he agreed. "Let me grab a bag from the Jeep real quick."

She followed him up to the vehicle, casting cautious glances around the yard. She normally would have closed herself in for the night by the time it was this dark, but things were quiet so far.

Mike grabbed for the backpack he kept in the backseat and tossed in a few bottles of water from the cooler. After making sure his body was blocking the view, he pulled a yellow box from the depths of the cooler and tucked it safely into the backpack as well.

"Alright, I think that's..." he began as he turned, closing the Jeep's door behind him. He froze when he saw she had taken a defensive

stance, surveying the yard.

From somewhere in the depths of the cloak she had drawn a sizable knife he recognized from his mother's kitchen and a childhood spent watching her carve up roasts and casseroles. The simple blade suddenly took on a menacing air as El held it tight in her grip, ready to strike at some unseen attacker. Where moments before she had been watching him load his bag, she was now darting her eyes quickly along the tree-line, craning her neck to one side as she strained to listen to something off in the distance.

"Inside," she stated, calm but firm. "Still far. Still time to eat."

Not waiting for a reply, she turned and started toward the basement with a brisk step, the knife still clutched in her fist as she walked. Mike followed close behind, curiosity and fear growing at the unseen dangers that had put her on edge. Only once they were inside did she tuck the knife away, freeing her hands to slide a sturdy cover over the closed and locked basement door. It added little to the protection of the door itself, but it blocked the window pane in the opening and gave her a little more piece of mind.

Peeling off the demogorgon cloak, she hung it in its place beside the door and turned back to Mike, immediately reading the question on his face.

"Scares the others," she smiled with a touch of pride. "Safer to walk."

Mike found himself speechless, stunned at just how well she had adapted to this world and made it her own. He had spent two decades trying to picture just what life had to be like for her, and while he had no doubt it had been a daily struggle, she had risen to the challenge in every possible way.

Stepping around Mike with another quick smile, El made her way over to the fire in the middle of the room, checking quickly on the meat she had roasting above the flames. Satisfied they still had a few minutes to go, she moved over to the basement stairs and took hold of a thick length of vine snaking its way around one of the banisters. Pulling a smaller blade from the strap around her waist, she sliced through the stalk.

While she hardly even noticed anymore, it had taken a while to get over the way the vines of this world would shriek and writhe as she sliced them. Mike, on the other hand, could only stare with a queasy churn of his stomach as she carried the chunk over to the fire, still twisting in her hands as the life drained away from the plant. Settling beside the flames, El quickly sliced the vine into smaller pieces and threaded them onto sticks which she placed over the flames beside the meat.

As El poked at the small fire and rotated several of the skewers, Mike finally let his eyes roam around the room where he had spent so much of his childhood. While he knew it was the same space, it has hardly recognizable as she had formed it to suit her needs. Nothing of the old furniture or belongings remained. The carpet had been pulled up, revealing the bare concrete floor below. In the middle of the room, where he and his friends had once gathered around board-games, a shallow pit had been chipped away where a warm cook-fire now burned. Looking up, he saw she had made a hole in the ceiling above, letting the smoke waft its way into the upper floors of the house. In the back corner, where his fathers tool bench used to stand, sat a bare mattress and a neat stack of blankets.

Leaning against the wall, close to the bed, stood a spear crafted from a sturdy branch with another large kitchen knife lashed to the end. From the rafters hung all manner of baskets and bags, stuffed with countless supplies collected over years of searching. Stepping closer to back wall, Mike realized with a twinge in his gut that the scratches he spotted at a distance were tally marks, carefully grouped in fives with an neat box around each hundred. It only took a glance to realize how high they went; she had been counting the days too.

Turning his attention back to the fire, Mike watched El slowly turning the sticks, taking great care with the meal she was preparing. With her attention on the task at hand, Mike let himself take her in, trying to reconcile the girl he had known with the woman sitting before him now. While they had been almost the same height as children, his 6 feet now surpassed her by almost 8 inches. Her slender, wiry frame betrayed the fact that she had fought for every bite of food that had sustained her through her captivity. Her dark brown hair, buzzed short the last time he had seen her, had grown

out a silvery gray which she wore tied with a length of fabric cut from an old shirt and roughly trimmed to the middle of her back. The premature tint of her hair only further betrayed the ravages malnutrition and lack sunlight had taken on her. Despite all that, it was her face that captured his attention. The years had matured her features, and yet her face somehow looked just the same as he remembered her that very first night when he found her in the rain. Soft, pale skin framed delicate lips, frowning in concentration at the task before. Her deep brown eyes still observed the world with cautious wonder and despite the dreary surroundings, they sparkled like stars in the firelight.

Satisfied dinner was just right, she looked up with a shy smile and offered one of the sticks to Mike. Settling on crossed legs next to her, he took the stick and carefully began to pull one of the meaty chunks off as it continued to gently sizzle.

"Good meat. Four legs and fur. Fresh," she explained, encouraging Mike to try the unfamiliar dish.

Taking a tentative bite, he began to chew and was pleasantly surprised. It certainly wasn't the worst thing he had ever tasted, surprisingly flavorful, and much better than he had expected this world to provide. If this was what she had been forced to survive on for 7520 days, he wasn't about to turn his nose up at it.

"It's good," he offered, giving her an appreciative smile. "Really good."

He couldn't quite be sure in the orange glow of the firelight, but he thought he saw a blush rise to her cheeks before she picked up a stick of her own and dug in. While she normally ate the meat straight from the stick, hunger beating out manners and no one around to impress, tonight she found herself following suit and picking the pieces off one at a time. They sat there in silence by the fire, both hungrier than they had realized, eating their roasted chunks and carefully watching one another. Both were still in shock that the reunion they had hoped so long for had truly happened, and scared that if they weren't careful, the moment would dissolve away in a swirl of fog and reveal it had been some sort of dream.

As dinner drew to an end, El gathered the sticks and placed them in

their usual spot along the wall, forgetting this was probably the last time she would ever use them. While her back was turned, Mike reached into the bag and pulled out a familiar yellow box, the gift he had tried so many times to bring her. Hearing a crinkle of plastic, El turned around quickly and stopped short. Her eyes lit up and her mouth broke out in a wide smile as the memories came flooding back.

"Would you like some dessert?" Mike offered, pleased at the reception.

She reached out slowly, carefully closing her fingers around the Eggo he held out to her. It had been the first treat he had ever given her, that first morning after bringing her out of the storm. It had been a first taste of the real world Papa would never have allowed her to experience. After all this time, the tasty delicacy was back in her hands, as Mike was giving her another chance at the world she had never been a part of.

She found herself getting choked up as she whispered, "Thank you," fighting back the sting in her eyes.

Sitting back beside the fire, and scooting just a little closer to Mike, she held the Eggo out to warm it over the fire. With quick and nimble fingers, she danced the treat through the flames, lightly toasting it while keeping her fingers from getting singed. Leaning back, satisfied it was warmed to her liking, El carefully broke the waffle in half and held one piece out to Mike. While he had been planning to pull one out for himself, he gratefully accepted her generous offer instead.

"Thanks," he said, looking down at steaming gift held gently in his hand. "I actually haven't had once since...well, since you went away. Every time I looked at them, I remembered how much you liked them and couldn't stand the thought of eating one when you couldn't. I promised myself the next Eggo I ate would be with you."

Mike surprised himself at the sudden outpouring; he hadn't planned on trying to talk about anything heavy like that until they were safely home. He looked up, a blush rising to his own cheeks as his eyes met hers and for just a moment he felt like they were kids again, before life so violently separated them.

"You're here now." she offered with a gentle smile. "I'm here now."

They each took a bite, floods of separate memories coursing through them as the sweetness ran over their tongues. One bite swiftly led to another as the symbolism of the shared moment sank in for both of them; her time of being alone, cut off from the world she so rightly deserved, was over. Mike was about to offer her another from the box when El suddenly sprang to her feet, the calm gone from her face. Where she had looked to the trees with intense caution out by the Jeep, she now stared toward the door with actual fear.

"They're close," she whispered, rushing to grab a large blanket folded near the bottom of the stairs.

"Who's..." Mike began to ask, before she silenced him with a sharp shush.

Hurrying back to the fire, she threw the thick, slimy looking cloth over the flames, quickly smothering the fire down to coals. Grabbing Mike by the hand, she pulled him toward the mattress in the back corner of the basement, grabbing for the spear with her free hand as they went. Handing him a blanket from the stack, El crouched down and pulled another around her own shoulders. With the fire gone, a chill quickly began to fall over the room.

Sitting next to her on the mattress, Mike puzzled at the sudden change that had come over her. In the dim glow of the dying embers, he could see the determined spark in her eyes as she stared at the door. The spear, nearly as tall as her, she held in a tight grip as her whole body tensed, ready to spring at any second. In that moment, Mike realized that while she had made this world her own, she was not its master. Dangerous things stalked the Upside-Down and she was as much prey as predator here.

For almost a half-hour they sat in silence, El tensed like a viper ready to strike, and Mike starting to wonder just what could leave her this afraid. When they first rushed to the mattress, Mike had reassured himself the shotgun was close at hand, leaned against the wall by his side just in case it was needed. As time passed without hearing anything for himself, he started to wonder if it was a reaction she used for any noise outside. While putting herself on high alert for the

slightest sound would be stressful, it was also a strategy that would have kept her alive all this time.

"El," he whispered, reaching a hand out to find her arm in the darkness.

"Quiet now," she gently hissed. "Spiders."

He settled back into silence, not wanting to push the issue, though he couldn't fathom how spiders could elicit such a response. Even if spiders were somehow twice their normal size in this world, her reaction didn't make sense. Still, he didn't want to push his luck and anger her with more questions. A few minutes later, he finally understood.

The first sound he heard was something crashing its way through the bushes that lined the back of the yard. He couldn't decide if it was one creature, or several, but based on the noise as they raced along, snapping branches as they went, he guessed they must be at least as large as he was. As they passed out of the bushes, he heard heavy footfalls along the ground as it crossed the yard just feet from the door. Right behind the racing prey, he heard a clicking noise like the chattering of hundreds of teeth, moving across the yard accompanied by the heavy swishing of legs propelling it along. In the darkness and through the walls, scale was hard to judge, but to Mike's ears it sounded to be immensely tall with many legs and it managed to cross the yard in just a few steps.

The clicking had only just started to fade in the distance when a piercing shriek ripped through the still night air. It was a penetrating combination of pain and fear, and deep in the primal core of his brain, Mike knew it was the sound of prey about to become a meal. A second scream, louder and more pained than the first tore out and was suddenly cut off, silence returning to the basement. Mike shuddered at the realization that the creature that had torn across the yard in fear, running for its life just moments before, was dead. He turned to look at Eleven, wondering if the same realization was running through her mind, but she sat expressionless, eyes fixed on the door and the spear clutched tightly in her fists.

"Big kill," she finally whispered. "Won't come back tonight."

Unfolding her legs from crouching, she sat back on the mattress, her shoulders resting against the wall. Even in a more relaxed position, she held tight to the spear, signaling to Mike that any number of dangers could still be lurking outside under the cover of darkness.

"How has she done this every night for 20 years?" he wondered to himself in awe and guilt as they passed the night in silence, side by side in the darkness.

14. Chapter 13

As Eleven predicted, they heard no more from the spiders that night. Still, she kept her guard up through the hours of darkness. It was all part of the routine she had lived for the majority of her life now and she faced the prospect of defending her shelter with even more fervor than usual, knowing she had someone besides herself to watch over. Whenever the spiders made their kill, the scavengers soon followed in the glow of day to see what they could secure for themselves. Eleven counted herself among those scavengers and relied heavily on the spiders taking down the weaker creatures of this world for her own survival.

It was rare for predators to come lurking around her basement door in the deep of the night with easier prey generally close at hand. The scavengers, on the other hand, were often drawn in by the fading smells of her cook-fire. Only the most daring of these stalked the night, following close in the wake of hunters and picking off what they left behind. As food got scarce, all the creatures of this world got more brazen in their pursuit of a meal, hunting earlier, risking encounters with others and fighting for scraps. She had engaged in this battle more times than she cared to remember and counted herself lucky that right now was a time of plenty. That meant a quiet night with nobody clawing at her door, threatening the safety of her sanctuary.

A little before dawn, El noticed that Mike had fallen asleep as he sat there by her side. He had been alert for much of the night, shaken up by the sounds of the hunt outside, but eventually exhaustion won out and he nodded off. There was something she found comforting about the deep, steady sounds of his breathing beside her in the dark as he slept. She knew from watching him over the years that while he often worked late into the night, he was still a creature of the day, and he hadn't had the luxury of a nap during the day-glow hours the day before. She decided to let him sleep, knowing she could wake him quickly if the need arose, though she doubted it would be necessary. Besides that, it gave her a chance to study him a little closer without worrying about the awkwardness of staring, as light began to faintly fill the sky.

Even though she had found him in the Void almost every day, it was still startling to finally see him in person and take in just how much he had changed over the years. She supposed she had changed too, but spending most of her life away from mirrors both here and in the lab, she had little sense of her own appearance to begin with. She had been surprised, standing with him on the lawn, how he towered over her in height now. When they embraced, she could practically feel him surrounding her, and it had immediately left her feeling safer than she had in a very long time. Looking closely at his face, her vision well adjusted to the darkness, she let her eyes trace the familiar contours.

A short growth of stubble outlined a jawline in need of a shave, and she couldn't help but smile to herself at the thought of how much Papa would disapprove of the appearance. More than once, she recalled him chastising one of his assistants for skipping a shave or doing a poor job of it, calling it sloppy and unprofessional. The fact that Mike Wheeler was no longer a boy but a man now was a prospect that she still had to sort out in her mind. The only men she had ever known were Papa and the workers in the lab, and Chief Hopper of course. She knew she didn't trust anyone from the lab, and she never had an opportunity to decide about the Chief. But Mike, she knew. She had nothing to fear from him; he had kept his promises, despite their seeming impossibility. She found herself excited at the prospect of learning up close the person she had watched him become from a far.

As the glow returned fully to the sky, El started to get up from the mattress, ready to add a tally-mark to the wall. It had been a morning ritual for a long time now, celebrating the passage of another night and a chance to stretch her legs once before settling down to sleep for a few hours. Falling gently back on the mattress, she decided it wasn't necessary today. There would be new days to count, but not here. She let her eyes close, intending to rest for just a little while before they started toward home. The next thing she knew, she felt the mattress shifting as Mike stood up to stretch. Disoriented and pulled from sleep, she was on her feet in a flash, spear in hand, readying herself to fight whatever had found its way into her sanctuary. As her eyes landed on the ashen-faced man already throwing his arms up for protection, the world came flooding back to her and she dropped the

spear to her side.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, ashamed and beginning to shake as the adrenaline ebbed away. He had fought so hard to reach her, and she had nearly killed him in her ingrained reaction to this world.

"Hey, it's okay," he said softly, stepping forward and putting his arms around her. "Really, I'm fine. I'm sorry I startled you, but it's all okay, really."

He held her for a few minutes until the shaking subsided. He had fully expected there might be reactions like this, and probably more once they were home, and he resolved to find a way to alert her to his presence in a gentler way. Finally, she slowly looked up into his eyes and saw that everything was alright. He wasn't afraid of her or angry about her reaction; his eyes only held concern for her. A small smile spread across her lips, instantly bringing a smile to his.

"If we're going to make it back to the gate before night, we should probably start packing up," Mike began, gently. "Is there anything you want to bring with you? There's plenty of room in the Jeep."

It had been Will's suggestion, that mementos from this world might help with her transition back to life on the other side. As much as she would probably want to forget this world, it had been her home for so long it might be hard to leave it all at once. Mike had to admit, while he had overcome the technical hurdles of the search, it was Will's invaluable advice and planning that would make all the difference once they were home.

El turned slowly, looking around the room and taking in twenty years of accumulated belongings. Tools carefully crafted from what she could find, bins she'd collected and baskets she had taught herself to weave; did those belong on the other side? Did she even want them there? What about the demogorgon cloak? It had smelled terrible those first few years, and it still made her skin crawl every time she put it on, but it had also saved her life more than once, keeping attackers at bay. She decided it would stay here, hanging on the hook by the door; it belong to this world, and when she was home, she wouldn't need to defend herself from scavengers trying to steal her hard-earned meal.

She pulled open the door to the old bathroom, inspecting the clothing and other belongings stacked neatly there. She had gathered what she could from the neighboring houses as she outgrew and wore out those first pieces she had taken from Mike's closet. She treasured each garment that had kept her warm and dry, but all had the stains and rot of this world and she knew there would be new, clean things on the other side.

Beside the clothes sat her last three cans of SPAM. Once new food stopped appearing in the houses close by, she had resigned herself to the meats and vines she could gather for herself. It was only in sheer desperation several years ago, when the appearance of another demogorgon was closely followed by a lengthy visit from the smoke-creature, that she hazarded a journey to the grocery store on the other side of town. It had been weeks since the departure of the terrifying shadow in the sky, and still the creatures of the forests were gone. Vines helped fill her stomach, but did little to nourish her, and El knew she had to take action. It had taken an entire day to make the trip there and back, but she returned with as many cans of the meat as she could carry, resolving to save them until times became dire. Only when she feared death was at the basement door, ready to take her gently by the hand and lead her away before Mike could arrive, would she tear open a can and carry on. Those last cans too, she would leave in this world, knowing food would be plentiful where she was going.

As she looked around, she realized there was little she wanted to bring back with her; only the belongings that had helped her hold on and be strong. Moving quickly back to the mattress, she opened Mike's old backpack, always kept close at hand. She began placing things inside, handling them carefully, protecting them for the journey. Nancy's music box went in first, the old science fair picture tucked inside. The delicate gears had gummed up a long time ago, but the dancer stood at the ready on pointed toes whenever she opened the lid, the melody still softly unwinding in El's mind. Beside that, Mike's old school photo, the frame corroded and the old paper yellowing, but the glass kept sparkling clean. Last, the old pink dress. It had quickly proven too cold for this world, but she had been unable to part with the garment. She had washed it as best she could and kept it close. It had been what she wore when Mike told her she

was pretty, and just holding the soft fabric to her chest, she could still feel the warmth of that moment.

Zippering the bag shut, she stood and looked around again, her eyes falling on the spear propped against the wall where she had set it minutes before. She wouldn't have any use for a spear on the other side, but still she felt herself drawn to the weapon. It had been her last line of defense, her protection and safety. She had held tight to the shaft through thousands of nights, slowly twisting it in her hands, the wood wearing to a smooth finish in her tense grip. It had been used to kill - for food and in defense - when her powers proved unreliable in this dark world.

Mike could see the hesitation painted on her face, and placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "It's alright if you want to bring it."

She nodded gratefully and picked up the weighty shaft, tucking it familiarly into her fist. She looked around one more time, spotting nothing else she would find herself needing.

"Ready," she announced with much more confidence than she actually felt.

"Alright," he said with a smile, "let's go."

Together, they crossed the basement floor one last time, stepping around the cold fire pit, and pushed aside the board covering the door. The yard was quiet as they stepped outside and marched carefully up to the Jeep. While Mike climbed in long enough to fire up the engine, Eleven turned to take one last look at the house that had been her refuge. It had never been home, but the place had been hers. She was happy beyond words to be leaving, but in some small way, she would miss it.

"Thank you," she whispered back to the house, standing silent in the still morning air.

She turned and, with some apprehension, climbed into the passenger seat of the Jeep while Mike carefully stowed her bag in the back. She knew she was being foolish, but she couldn't bring herself to let go of the spear just yet. She settled back in the seat and rested the tail of

the spear on the floor between her feet, while the business-end sat tucked carefully over her shoulder. As Mike climbed in, she tried to paint a smile on her face, but the tight grip she held on the weapon betrayed the worry running through her mind. This was only the third time she'd ridden in a car, and the last trip had delivered her to the school where everything fell apart. Still, she kept reminding herself, this was not the same; they were going home. Real home.

Picking up on her nerves, Mike laid a hand softly on El's arm. She flinched for an instant, still trying to get used to contact that didn't mean immediate danger.

"It'll be okay," Mike offered, reassuringly. "I'm sorry the engine is a little loud, but it's our most reliable way out of here. If you want to close your eyes, and try to sleep while we drive, I don't mind. It might help the drive go quicker for you."

She didn't think sleep would be possible, but appreciated the reassurances all the same. The smile that came to her face this time was genuine, the worry ebbing away just a little. She flinched again as the truck began to roll forward, bumping its way along the vine-covered streets of Hawkins. It felt strange passing through the streets that had been her hunting grounds, and realizing she would never have to walk their dangerous shadows again. Before long, they had passed through downtown and were out on the main highway, farther than she had ever been, in either version of the world.

Once town had given way to wide fields of vines, El turned her attention back to Mike. He kept a sharp eye on the road as they went, the headlights struggling to cut their way through the spores filing the air. Occasionally he turned quickly to check on her, a blush rising to his cheeks each time their eyes met. Eventually the rumble of tires on the road sunk deep into her mind and sleep won out. She stayed asleep through the pit-stop to clear out the air filter, and the next thing she knew, the vehicle was bouncing its way across a few large pieces of wood and pulling to a stop inside a large building.

She watched with groggy curiosity, sleep still draining away from her mind, as Mike carefully pulled a plastic box from where it was strapped under the Jeep's dashboard. Undoing two latches, he lifted the lid and pulled out a smaller black rectangle with a several buttons

set into the surface. She watched in amazement as he pressed the green button on the device, and a pinprick of glowing red light appeared in the air just feet in front of them. In seconds, the point grew until a shimmering disk, larger than the Jeep, stood before them and seemed almost to beckon them forward. Turning to look at Mike, she saw he was already watching her, a mix of worry and relief across his face.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

Terrified at the unknown future laying before her, El slowly nodded, eyes already turning back toward the disk.

"You might want to cover your eyes as we go through," he offered, demonstrating with his own hand. "Your eyes are used to the dark, so it's going to be pretty bright on the other side."

Raising a hand to her face and squeezing her eyes shut, El drew a sharp breath as they started forward. "This is it," she thought. "I'm going home."

As they pulled through to the other side, her eyes were assaulted by a blinding white that fought its way through fingers and clenched eyelids. She felt the Jeep pull to a stop, and everything became blissfully quiet as Mike shut off the engine.

"I'll take care of the lights," Mike offered as he threw open his door and jumped out.

Hitting a switch on the wall, Mike killed all but two of the overhead lights, dropping the lab into a gentle twilight. Sensing the change in intensity, El carefully spread her fingers and cracked one eye open, blinking hard against the remaining light. It was still far brighter than she was accustomed, but now she could make out her surroundings. As Mike hit another switch on the wall, El saw the red glow of the portal fade and then disappear entirely as he closed the gate to the Upside-Down for the last time. Looking around, El marveled at the familiarity of the place; she had found Mike here so many times, sometimes working long into the night in his endless quest to reach her.

The gate shut down, Mike turned his attention to the computer, needing to take care of one important detail before they left for home. He opened a new email and typed the words he had been waiting decades to send.

Will,

*The Eggos have been delivered. **WE** are back.*

I'll be in touch soon.

Mike

Satisfied with the note, Mike hit send and locked the computer. He could only imagine the celebration about to sweep through the Byers' house, and the bottle of whisky in Will's study that would go untouched today. Turning around, he noticed El had climbed out of the Jeep and was looking around the lab. As she slowly turned, taking several deep breaths, a look of concern started to spread across her face.

"Something's not right," her mind was screaming. She took a deep breath, followed quickly by another, desperate to determine what was putting her brain on high-alert. The air tastes wrong, she decided, weird somehow. Her breath shortened to a rapid gasp as her apprehension grew, until at last she finally identified the problem; the air was clean and fresh, reviving and full of life. Calming again, she took several deep breaths and let the long forgotten feeling wash over her.

"Are you okay?" Mike asked, taking a step toward her, still concerned over the brief panic attack.

She looked back at him with a grateful smile. "Yes," she said, calm and confident.

She closed her eyes, drawing in another deep breath and held it. The gate was closed, and the Upside-Down and all its horrors were locked away. She was alright. She had survived. She was home.

Eleven was right-side up.

15. Chapter 14

Mike closed the distance over to El, relieved that the look of panic had left her face.

"Are you sure you're alright?" he asked, unable to shake his own apprehension.

"Yes," she nodded, "air is clean. Tasted strange."

"Oh, okay," he said, relieved. "That makes sense."

El continued looking around the space she had come to so many times in her mind, and realized how little of it she had actually seen. In her visits, she had always been more focused on Mike and what he was doing, rather than where he was. As her eyes scanned from shelf to shelf and across the desks and work-spaces, the enormity of it all began to sink in. Every device, every tool, every piece of equipment: all of it had been carefully gathered and assembled for the singular purpose of finding her and bringing her home. Her eyes eventually found their way back to Mike, watching her with a knowing smile on his face, and she found herself wondering if there was time enough in the world to ever fully thank him.

"I've got everything shut down here. I think we're ready to go to the house." He watched a trace of doubt seep back into her smile. "I know it's been a long day of driving. I promise, just this one last quick stretch, and we'll be home and done."

The apprehension at another trip in the Jeep flooded into her mind and ebbed away just as fast with that simple promise. Her whole body was stiff from hours in the loud, bumping machine with its thinly padded seat. She was tired, despite napping on the drive, though she supposed Mike had to be too. "You've come this far," she told herself, "you can do just a little more."

El climbed back into the passenger seat, settling the spear between her feet and gripping the sturdy shaft for reassurance as Mike started the engine. She was relieved to find it didn't seem quiet as loud this time, though maybe she had just started to get used to it.

"Now that we're back on this side, we'll need to belt up," Mike said, holding up the two halves of his seat-belt to show her.

El felt around the edges of her own seat until she located the two canvas straps, and then looked back to watch as Mike demonstrated how to hook the ends together and pull it snug. She copied his actions, securing the belt across her own lap, not grasping the purpose but going along if it meant getting the ride over with.

"You'll probably want these, too," Mike offered, passing her a dark pair of sunglasses. "it's a pretty bright afternoon out."

She slipped the frames on her face, mimicking Mike as he put on his own pair, and the lab fell into a deep gloom. Moments later, he hit another button on the Jeep's dash, and the large door set into the side of the building began to roll open, bathing the room in sunlight. She was immediately grateful for both the dark glasses and his planning. Where the lights of the lab had been harsh, the intense June sunshine would have been blinding without them.

As they pulled out of the lab and onto the street, El's eyes began to adjust and she looked around in astonished wonder. Everything seemed so much bigger than Hawkins; busier and more alive. True, she had only been through the right-side-up version of the town the one time, on the back of Mike's bike, but it was a memory she had replayed a thousand times in her mind. This felt so much the same and she found herself desperately trying to absorb everything she saw of a world she never knew existed.

The low, wide buildings of the industrial park gave way to strip malls full of stores, and then to office buildings that grew ever taller as they drove. People walked along the sidewalks, going about their lives, taking no notice of the woman staring at them with such rapt attention as the Jeep rolled by.

Across town, Jennifer raced down the hall toward Will's office, summoned from the kitchen by his frantic call.

"Jen!" he shouted again, in a tone she couldn't place.

She stopped in the doorway, startled by his demeanor. Tears ran down his face as he uttered a sound somewhere between a sob and a laugh. Meanwhile, his mouth was pulled into one of the widest grins she'd ever seen. Given his usual calm levelheadedness, she was worried he might have actually lost his mind.

"Will?" she asked, distressed by his apparent breakdown. "What is it?"

She crossed the room in two quick steps and crouched by his chair, bringing herself to his level. After trying unsuccessfully to get the words out, Will pointed to the screen of his laptop, and Mike's email, still sitting open.

Jennifer read the brief message twice before slowly turning to look at Will again, her own eyes beginning to mist over.

"He found her? He really did it?"

"He did it," Will confirmed with a nod, finally finding his voice. "He actually found her."

His smile died away as the tears overtook him again. Jennifer gathered him in her arms as his body shook with sobs. She knew he still carried the guilt of everything that had happened all those years ago, and had done his best to keep the feelings down, trying to be strong for his best friend. They knew Mike was the only one who could get to El, so they had done all they could to support him.

The email hadn't said if she was okay or not, only that El was with him. They had never told Mike as much, but Will regularly had nightmares of what she might be like when he finally reached her. He had read enough case studies of children lost to the wilds of the world for a few years and the animalistic natures they quickly adopted. He was terrified that two decades in that awful place might have twisted her into some feral creature of the night, and that, while alive, there would be nothing they could do for her.

Jennifer tried her best to stay optimistic, for both their sake, as she comforted her tortured husband. As she reasoned, the odds were very small his fears would play out. She only had Will's description of the Upside-Down, and Mike's glowing descriptions of Eleven to go on, but

she reasoned the girl would be alright. It would take a steady, cautious mind and a strong will to survive, to last for so long in that place. If she truly had gone feral, there was little chance Mike would have found her, even if he reached the right world. She also highly doubted the gentle, determined Mike Wheeler would take her by force and drag her back to this world in chains. So the fact that he had said they were back, together, she took to mean El was alive and ready for them to help her back into the world. For now, all they could do was wait and hope.

In the Jeep, an enthralled Eleven continued to soak up the world as they drove through it. She had spent years trying to form a picture of what this side looked like from her visits to Mike. Just like with his lab, however, she had always found herself far more focused on him than his surroundings. She knew it would be important someday, to have some idea of what she was stepping into, but she couldn't help but keep her attention on the man who made her life worth living. The calls on the radio, seated quietly at the desk in his room, were usually the high-point of her days. Those were the times he would talk to her directly, to let her know he wasn't giving up and that he hoped she was doing okay. Other times, though, she found he would talk to her softly as he toiled away at his workbench, or ate another dinner alone, or tended to his yard. She wasn't sure he even knew he was doing it, he would just start talking mid-thought and carry on, describing what he was doing or how he was feeling. She could sit and listen to his little explanations all day but her energy never held out as long as she would have liked.

Still, the radio calls were what she truly longed for each day. Those were deliberate and thoughtful and she knew those were what he intended for her to hear. In those calls, he would tell her just how strong he knew she was, and to hold on just a little longer, and that her strength was what helped to keep him going. In truth, his belief in her strength kept her going as well. Those calls were also where he would tell her that he loved her. Love was a word she had heard a few times growing up in the lab, in the stories and fairy-tales Papa gave her. She hadn't understood the idea fully, but she had known that it was something for princesses and princes and happy-endings, not for little girls with short-buzzed hair who lived in a lab. She was

sure she probably still didn't understand it fully, but she had come to know what the word meant as she watched the person she cared about more than anything, fight to the ends of the Earth and beyond to reach the person he cared about as much in return.

These thoughts of loving and caring were circling gently in El's head as they sat stopped at a red light, waiting for the crossing traffic to clear. Her mind was finally starting to relax, and was allowing her to believe that, just maybe, things were going to be alright. The light turned green and Mike started through the intersection when a man stepped off the sidewalk and began to cross on the far side. He stopped the Jeep in plenty of time, but the car behind came precariously close, stopping with a squeal of breaks and the irate driver leaning hard on the horn. Immediately, the serenity in El's mind dropped away as her whole body tensed. Her eyes slammed shut and she clapped one hand over her ear, driving her other into her shoulder to block out the sound, her free hand gripping the spear tightly.

The reaction wasn't lost on Mike, and he quickly placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "I'm sorry about that. I know this is a lot to take in all at once. You can keep your eyes shut, and your ears blocked, if that helps. We are just a few minutes from home."

She nodded, and tried her best to shut out the world again and bring her heartbeat under control. It was going to take some time to get used to the noises of the world, and not drop into fight-or-flight mode every time she heard an unfamiliar sound.

As they began to move again, Mike cursed the fact that the Jeep was a stick shift and so he was forced to remove the hand from her shoulder. Clear of the intersection, the irate driver from behind sped up and pulled quickly around the Jeep. Mike regarded the passing driver with a nasty glare and a firmly raised middle finger, swearing silently at the man for breaking El's moment of serenity and making the trip that much harder on her.

They passed the last few minutes of the drive uneventfully, and Mike breathed a sigh of relief as he pulled the Jeep into the garage and hit the button to close the door behind them. Only when the world was safely shut out did he turn off the Jeep and place a hand back on El's

shoulder, giving her a gentle shake.

"We're home," he said softly as she lifted the ear back off her shoulder.

Slowly she opened her eyes and pulled the sunglasses back off her face, looks around the dim and silent garage.

"Home?" she asked slowly, confirming the journey was done.

"Home," he nodded with a small smile.

Climbing out, Mike went around to the passenger side where El was struggling with the latch on her seat-belt.

"Here, let me," he offered, leaning in and releasing the buckle.

As he lifted the strap off her lap, he was suddenly aware of just how close they were, and a quick blush rose to his cheeks. Straightening up, Mike offered El his hand and helped her step out of the Jeep, shutting the door behind her. He led her into the small mudroom that separated the garage from the kitchen, where he stopped long enough to step out of his boots and hang his coat up on a hook.

El followed suit, mirroring Mike's movements, unsure if she should be doing anything different. She leaned down and undid the knots on her own boots, trying to remember how long it had been since she last took them off, deciding it had been at least three groups of marks on the wall - 15 days. As she pulled her feet free, Mike winced at the sight of her socks, full of holes and stained a deep brown by the combination of being worn too long at a stretch and water too foul to attempt a good washing. It was not a reaction of disgust at the socks themselves or any judgement of El for not keeping them cleaner, but heartbroken disgust at the conditions she had been forced to endure and his inability to reach her sooner. The boots done, El shrugged out of her own coat and hung it on the empty hook next to Mike's. Again, dirt and grime and splotches Mike was almost certain were blood nearly hid the original bright red plaid pattern.

"Alright, guess its time for the nickle tour," Mike joked, not quite sure how best to proceed.

El gave him a puzzled look, but smiled again as he reached out and took her hand. Mike led the way out of the mudroom and into the kitchen, bright and clean, and El found herself looking around with that same wonder she had at 12, the last time he showed her around another house.

"You can help yourself to anything in the fridge, or the cupboards." he offered, "whatever we don't have right now, I can pick up at the store."

He led the way out into the living room and paused again, letting her take it all in. He couldn't help but remember the tour he had given that first morning after he found her, and how oblivious he had been at the time. He should have noticed the way she was looking at the most mundane things in his home like she was seeing them for the very first time because that was exactly what was happening. Standing in his living room now, he was at a loss at what to actually point out.

"TV is in here. There's a little more too it than my dad's old set, but I can show you how to work it when you're ready."

El slowly turned, looking over the room. Shelves of books and a few framed pictures lined one wall, a couch sat along another. Her eyes fell on a chair, much like the old recliner Mike had shown her before, and she wondered if this one flipped back with that same exhilarating thump. She might have to try that at some point, but for now she could sense there was more he wanted to show her, and there was a was something hanging unsaid between them, waiting to come out.

He led her over to the stairs and they went up, pausing briefly outside one door which Mike indicated as his room. She had found him there countless times and felt she knew the space well enough for now.

"And this," he said, leading her over to the closed door across the hall, "is your room."

He twisted the nob, and gently swung the door inward, letting El step through first. In his mind, he found he was second-guessing every piece of furniture, the color of the curtains, the bedding; he so badly

wanted it to be perfect and everything she deserved.

El stepped to the middle of the room and did a slow turn, her eyes darting across each detail. The room was warm and inviting, with walls painted the palest pink, light gray curtains diffusing the light pouring in through the big window on the far wall. Soft, silvery cushions lined the bench seat at the window's base. A little table, clean and white, with a matching chair and a mirror hung on the wall behind. A matching dresser with a pot on top, a small plant with delicate pink flowers growing in it. A bed - a real bed, just like he had promised her - with a fluffy comforter and matching pillows, all a crisp, clean white. They looked unbelievably soft and inviting, calling back to mind just how tired she was getting.

Finally, her eyes came back around and found Mike, standing in the doorway, a look of hopeful uncertainty on his face.

"I hope you like it," Mike started, fighting a lump caught in his throat. "If there's anything you want different, we can change it. Different curtains, or the bedspread; I wasn't sure if maybe I should have gone with a soft pink to match the walls, or maybe something else, but I thought you would like brightness of the white. Or, if you'd rather have the room across the hall, I can move things around and that can be yours."

"Mike," she said, halting his rambling. She found her eyes starting to mist over, "I like it. Perfect."

She had never gotten over the thoughtfulness of the blanket fort he first built her. It was a simple thing, but it had been a space just for her and he had taken the time to make sure it was just right. The effort he had put into this room, a special place all her own, was something else entirely. Stepping forward, she threw her arms around him, nestling comfortably against his sturdy frame. Relief flooded through Mike and he pulled her tight to his chest.

"I know all this has been a lot today," Mike began softly, "and I'm sorry I've kept us moving the whole time to get here. I think a part of me refused to believe you were really safe until we were all the way home. But now that we're here, we can take things just as slow as you want or need. You're safe here."

He felt her nod gently, never lifting her head from where it rested on his chest.

"When you're ready, we can talk about...well...everything, I guess. I have so many questions, but not until you're ready."

She nodded again, pulling her arms tighter around him. Mike was anxious to know all she had been through and just how she had survived the Upside-Down, but was in many ways dreading the conversation; he already knew he would feel a fresh stab of guilt at each hardship she had endured. And just like with Will, he found himself weighing his desire to understand, against the pain of making her relive all those moments. As it was, he was barely holding himself together, now that the journey was done and his mind was accepting that it was real and she was actually home safe.

"I missed you," El whispered, her own mind beginning to agree that it was really over.

That simple confession was all it took to break down the last of the wall Mike had been holding up.

"I missed you too. So much," he whispered back, pressing a gentle kiss to her forehead as hot tears broke free and ran down his cheeks.

His tears encouraged her own to fall as they stood there, wrapped in the safety of each other's arms. Where their relief the night before had been a gentle rain, today in the quiet safety of her room, it was a raging tempest. Twenty years of not knowing was finally put to rest. It was really over, and they wouldn't let anything separate them again.

Neither was willing to release the other as they stood there, the sun slowly fading from the sky and the room falling into twilight. When their legs were too tired to stand any longer, they sank to their knees, but they held the embrace until no more tears would come.

16. Chapter 15

When they finally parted just enough to look at one another, eyes red and cheeks raw, a wide and content smile stretched across El's face. The sun was gone from the sky and the room was bathed in a soft light coming from the upper edges of the wall, another of Mike's little touches to make the space just right. The lights could be set as low as a child's night-light, or bright as a summer's day; whatever she needed.

"Are you hungry at all?" Mike asked, breaking the silence. "I can fix you something to eat. Or we can talk. Or, if your tired, you can try out your new bed. Or, whatever else you need..." He trailed off, not sure what else to offer.

"Tired," she agreed, softly.

El looked at the bed with longing, the sheets so soft and inviting. Her bed in the lab had always been more for function than comfort, with its thin padding and scratchy blankets. The springs in her mattress in the basement had long ago lost their support and the whole thing had been more just a way to keep off the cold concrete floor. Looking down at her hands, no longer obscured by the dim firelight she was used to, she realized she was still covered in layers of Upside-Down and didn't want to ruin the cleanliness of the space Mike had created for her.

"Clean?" she asked, looking first at her hands, then slowly back up at Mike.

"Of course," he said, kicking himself for not thinking to offer that straight off. A shower was usually one of the first things he wanted after getting back from a trip out through the portal, right after getting his head on straight again.

"Your room has its own bathroom," he went on, guiding her over to a door off to one side of the bed. "I think I've got everything you need in here. I can get you set up for a shower, or a bath, your choice."

She flinched at the second option, a little surprised that the word *bath*

could still conjure up memories so clearly. She quickly pushed the old meaning aside, knowing Mike didn't mean anything close to the old tank in the lab.

"Bath," she decided, feeling sleep already threatening to overtake her and not wanting to stand any longer.

"One warm bath, coming right up," Mike announced with a smile.

After getting the water running at what he hoped was a comfortable temperature, he pulled the stopper on the drain and let the tub start to fill. Turning around, he was startled to find her already undressing. Her heavy gray sweatshirt lay in a pile at her feet and she was peeling off a Bush/Quail 1988 election t-shirt she had scrounged up at a neighbors house years ago. He quickly realized the action shouldn't have come as any sort of surprise; it was the same thing she had tried to do that first night in his basement. Twenty years on her own hadn't taught any new lessons about privacy. He quickly averted his eyes, looking back at the tub and checking on its progress as he tried to give her what space he could in the tiny room.

As El dropped the t-shirt into the pile at her feet, she couldn't help but notice the blush that had risen to Mike's cheeks as he sat on the edge of the tub watching it fill. A vague recollection sparked in her mind from that first night in the rain, when she had tried to change out of the wet t-shirt and Mike had blushed in much the same way. But that time, he had told her she should change in the bathroom, and that's where she was right now, so she must be doing that right. For now, she would file that away among the dozens of other curious questions that had come to mind in her short time back.

As the tub filled, the room became warm with the rising steam, and she found herself suddenly aware how much the cold was still permeated deep inside her. Working quickly, she discarded the rest of her clothes. First removing the two blades she still had secured to the waist of her pants, she untied the knot in the braided vine she used for a belt. The dark canvas trousers had always been far too big on her, but they allowed room for a pair of long-johns underneath, which she had been immensely grateful to find on a clothing hunt a few years prior. These were both added to the pile along with her socks. Last to go was the length of fabric she had cut from old bed-

sheets, worn tightly wrapped around her chest for support. She had been proud of the innovation, one among many she had figured out for herself, growing up alone in the Upside-Down.

Shutting off the water, Mike turned back to El, his eyes locked on hers and his gaze respectfully North of her chin.

"Okay, there's shampoo and body-wash on the tub's shelf," he began, pointing out the bottles neatly arranged on the ledge that ran around the tub's edge. "And a towel and washcloth right here on the rack."

Starting toward the door, he went on, "I'll give you a little privacy, but I'll be right outside in your room, getting your bed ready if you need anything. I can even leave the door open a crack, if you want."

Mike found himself torn, assuming she wouldn't want an audience while she was bathing and wanting to give her some space, but also hesitant to leave her alone. There would only be a few feet and a thin wall separating them, but even that felt too far. No matter how many times he reminded himself it wasn't so, he couldn't shake the feeling if he let her out of his sight, she might vanish all over again. As ridiculous as it felt, he also didn't want her to feel like he was somehow abandoning her.

The decision to stay or go was made simpler as he took a step toward the door. As he moved past her, El suddenly shot a hand forward and gripped his arm.

"Stay," she said, a panic in her eyes, softly adding, "please?"

She knew it was crazy, and she had no logical reason to be panicking, but as he was stepping toward the door all she could think was that she didn't want to be alone. He was only going to be in the next room and there was nothing to be afraid of here. He wasn't going away and the creatures of the dark weren't coming for her; they were locked away in the world she was finally free of. She had done just fine on her own for as long as she could remember, and yet, the idea of being alone right now terrified her.

Mike looked with sympathy at her pleading eyes. "Of course," he said. "I'll stay right here if you want."

"Thanks," she whispered gratefully as he turned away from the door.

As she settled into the water, letting the warmth run blissfully over her, she leaned her head back with a sigh. The cold of the Upside-Down had been a part of life for so long, she had forgotten what real warmth actually felt like, and she let the feeling sink deep. Mike sat on the floor beside the tub, his back against the wall. Exhaustion from the day was quickly catching up with him as well and he found his attention drawn to a slow and steady drip of water from the faucet, the soft patter the only sound he could hear besides his own hammering heartbeat.

He wasn't sure if he had actually drifted off, or merely succumbed to the hypnotic drip from the faucet, but Mike's mind snapped back to attention as El leaned forward to grab the washcloth and began to scrub at the grime coating her hands and slowly worked her way up her arms. She struggled to find the right angle as she reached her back and was about to give up on that when Mike spoke up.

"I can get your back," he offered, quickly adding, "if you want."

In answer, El leaned forward in the tub and held out the cloth, already turning a dark brown as it cleansed away that other world. Taking the offered cloth and giving it a quick swirling rinse in the tub, Mike gently pressed it to her back. Once again, she flinched initially at the touch, every muscle in her back pulling tight as she tensed up, before relaxing again as she mentally chastised herself for the reaction. Slowly and methodically, Mike worked the washcloth around her back, clearing away the dark remains of the Upside-Down. Each pass revealed soft and pale skin, tinged pink from the warmth of the water. Seeing her up close, no longer hidden under layers of clothing, he was painfully aware of just how small she was, a further testament to the harsh existence she had lived. He decided frail was probably the wrong term because she seemed to be all muscle and he had no doubt she could hold her own in a fight, but it was clear she was painfully underfed.

As he worked his way down her back, the washcloth also began to reveal the scars that marred her skin, ghostly white marks barely visible next to the pale flesh around them. Some were small - punctures and scraps - not unlike the ones he had picked up as a

child playing out in the woods. Others, though, were unmistakable as to their source. Groups of three lines, parallel and perfectly spaced that could have only come from clawed paws. Wide, rounded arches of marks that betrayed their source as a mouth full of hungry teeth. He knew there was a story of struggle and survival behind every one of them and his heart broke as each new mark revealed itself as the grime sloughed away.

After draining the filthy, quickly cooling water, and refilling the tub with a fresh round of warmth, Mike offered to wash her hair as well. She hadn't even considered that, having never given her hair much thought beyond combing it out with her fingers to keep the tangles at bay and letting the rain rinse through it on her hunts. Leaning back in the clean water, she closed her eyes with a contented smile as Mike began to work the flowery-scented shampoo through her hair, his fingers soothingly massaging her scalp.

When a second round of shampoo was rinsed away and the tub drained, Mike handed El the large, fluffy bath towel before starting for the door.

"Go ahead and dry off, I'm going to get something for you."

El worked the towel over her skin, drying away the remaining droplets of water and feeling better than she had in years. She thought back and decided the last time she had truly been clean was her shower the morning before she escaped from the lab. Even the pool in the gym had left her feeling gritty from all the salt and she had been desperately looking forward to a shower at Mrs. Byers' house once they were able to go back, but that had never happened.

Moments later, Mike came back into the room carrying a fluffy white bathrobe.

"Here, this should be a little warmer than a towel," Mike offered, holding out the robe to her and turning his eyes to the side as she pulled it on.

The robe was like a warm hug wrapping her exhausted frame and she was infinitely grateful not to be pulling back on the stiff and gritty clothes she had been wearing. She assumed there would be time

enough tomorrow to wash those.

"Alright, let's see about something for you to wear," he continued, taking her hand and leading the way back into the bedroom.

El followed, a little confused. She had assumed the bathrobe was the only clean thing he had for her, but thought he might be planning to offer a few things of his own to wear. She decided that would be fitting, since she had already spent years wearing his clothes.

They stopped in front of the dresser by her bed, and Mike stepped back, looking her over from head to foot before turning to the dresser and deciding on one of the middle drawers. Pulling it open, she was surprised to see it was already full of clothes - t-shirts, sweatpants, jeans, shorts - all neatly grouped and sorted by size. After picking through several stacks, Mike passed a pair of sweatpants to her. He also held a long-sleeve t-shirt but after looking her over again, decided a different size might be in order. Dropping the shirt back in the middle drawer, he pulled open the next drawer up, packed with even more options of smaller sizes, and picked one he thought would work better, handing it back to the stunned woman watching him work.

Closing the two middle drawers, Mike pulled open the top drawer and picked through to find underwear, socks and a sports-bra he thought would be appropriate sizes. He worked quickly, fighting the blush heating his cheeks as he picked through the undergarments and handed them back to El. Closing up the dresser, he turned back to find her holding the bundle of clothes like some precious gift, looking first at the pile in her hands and then up at him.

"Jennifer - Will's wife - she helped me get a few things for when you first got back," Mike explained, indicating the dresser again. "We weren't sure what size you would need, so there's a little of everything in there. Now that you're here, we can get you better clothes that are the right size."

While Mike found himself regretting he didn't have more choices to offer her right now, he was happy he had at least talked Jen out of resorting to thrift-stores for this first round of clothes, even though most would be the wrong size and go unused. If all he was going to

be able to offer El were a few mismatched pairs of pants and t-shirts, he was at least going to give her something new. Meanwhile, El couldn't believe she was holding clothes that had been bought just for her and not offered from Mike's own closet or stolen from neighbors.

As El began to lay the pieces of the outfit on the bed, Mike was suddenly aware of just how grimy he still was, surrounded by the clean surroundings of the room.

"While you get changed, I think I'm going to go over to my room and grab a shower real quick," he said, adding "Will you be alright for a few minutes?"

Immediately, he berated himself for the choice of words; of course she would be fine on her own for a few minutes, but he wondered if he would be. El felt the panic start to return, but put it quickly to rest, reassuring herself he would be just across the hall and he was coming right back. She nodded and pulled a quick smile.

"Okay then," he smiled back. "If you need anything, just come get me."

While Mike was across the hall, El set to work changing into her new clothes. Each piece astounded her with how soft and clean it felt and everything had just a hint of a flowery, soapy smell. The sports-bra took a few minutes before she puzzled out its purpose, wondering why Mike he had given a sleeveless shirt that was much too small. When the answer finally struck her, she almost laughed, and then immediately kicked herself for passing over similar garments when she raided neighboring houses for clothes. It turned out to be far more comfortable and easier to wear than the strip of bed-sheet she had been using for that purpose.

When Mike came back a few minutes later, scrubbed free of the Upside-Down and still pink from the hot water, he found El seated at the vanity-table. She didn't notice him enter and he stood for a moment just watching her as she studied her own reflection, slowly working her fingers through her hair to remove the tangles.

"I can put it into a braid for you, if you want," Mike offered.

"Braid?" she asked, unsure what he meant.

"It's like a series of twisty knots for your hair," he explained, as she threw him a skeptical look. "It's a way to keep your hair neat and out of the way while you sleep. I got lots of practice doing it to Holly's hair growing up. It took her forever to learn to do it for herself, so she used to always come to me to braid it for her."

El had never met Mike's little sister, but she had seen her picture and been aware of her presence over the years when she visited Mike in the void. She nodded with a smile and Mike stepped behind her and pulled a brush out of the table's top drawer. After brushing out the few remaining tangles, he began to work his fingers through her hair, carefully dividing the strands into groups and crossing them over each other. As he stood there, close beside her, she was aware of the spicy-sweet scent of his soap radiating off his warm skin. She had noticed it the night before, as they past the hours side-by-side in the dark, but tonight, fresh from the shower, the scent filled her head and she knew the smell would forever remind her of this moment.

After just a few minutes of gentle twists, Mike made quick work of her hair and laid the braid over her shoulder so she could inspect it in the mirror. El ran her fingers slowly down the length, admiring how the silvery strands wove in and out of one another until they came neatly together at the purple elastic band he had secured the end with.

"Pretty," she declared, happy with the new look.

"Pretty," Mike quietly agreed.

Had she glanced up and caught Mike's gaze in the mirror, she would have realized he wasn't looking at her hair as he made the adoring declaration. Instead, her eyes blurred as a yawn escaped her lips.

"Ready for bed?" Mike asked.

She nodded. "Please stay. Don't..." she paused, mustering her courage. "Don't want to be alone."

"You're not alone. I'll stay right here with you as long as you want,"

Mike offered, relieved that she wanted him to stay; he found himself afraid to be alone at the moment, too.

After dimming the room's lights to a level where they could sleep, but El was still comfortable with her surroundings, they settled into bed. To El, the sheets felt like heaven, and she decided if this was all some fantastic dream, she would be just fine never waking up. Mike lay on his back, confining himself well to one side of the queen-size mattress, unsure just how much space she might want for herself. El quickly curled herself against his side, and Mike placed an arm around her, holding her close.

"Goodnight, El," Mike whispered, planting a kiss to the top of her head.

"night Mike," she muttered, sleep quickly dragging her under.

Within minutes she was fast asleep, while Mike lay there in the twilight listening to her soft and steady breathing, still not believing she was actually here. He had hoped and prayed and striven for this moment, not entirely sure it was even possible but willing to spend a lifetime chasing it all the same. As El's mind sunk deeper into sleep, Mike realized the twitches that shook her slender frame and the small cries escaping her lips were likely manifestations of all the horrors she had faced, and he vowed to help her find peace with each and every one of them. Wrapping his arms tighter around her, the embrace seemed to find its way into her subconscious and drove the monsters away. Eventually, Mike drifted off to sleep as well, and the two passed the night in blissful, dreamless harmony.

Neither knew it, but it would be one of the last peaceful nights they would have for quite a while. The mental demons they had held at bay in the name of survival had been keeping score and would eventually call in their debt. But that was a problem for another night. Tonight, they held one another close, two broken halves of a shattered soul brought back together at long last.

After the most refreshing night of sleep El could recall, she begrudgingly slipped out of Mike's arms and the warmth of the bed for a trip to the bathroom. She found herself almost laughing at the absurd serenity of relieving herself without buckets or bushes and not

having to keep herself alert for approaching danger.

On her way back to bed, she found herself drawn to the window and the diffused pink glow starting to peek through the curtains. Pulling the silky gray fabric off to one side, she settled quietly on the window seat and stared out across the neighboring rooftops and off to the horizon. She had heard about sunrises in one of the poems Papa made her recite, but she had never actually seen one for herself. The few days she had been out of the lab, she had either slept through the dawn or been hidden away in Mike's basement. As she watched, the sky passed through more shades of pink and orange than she even thought possible and she found herself holding her breath in anticipation.

Shifting in his sleep, Mike found himself startled awake when he realized his arms were empty. For the briefest moment of sinking dread, he feared it had all been some amazing dream and that he would open his eyes to find he was alone in his own bed, facing another day in the endless search. Forcing his eyes open, he was pleasantly relieved to find he was still there in El's room. Looking slowly around, he spotted her sitting at the window, quietly watching the oncoming dawn. With her knees drawn tight to her chest and the orange glow lighting her face, she was the portrait of quiet serenity. In the rapidly rising light, he could only marvel at the peaceful joy painted on her face as she watched what he realized was probably the first sunrise she had ever seen. As much as he wanted to join her at the window, he knew this special moment was something just for her.

When the sun finally broke over the horizon, El felt a sigh catch in her throat as tears welled in her eyes. The brilliant point of light peaking its way over the dark line of the horizon was mesmerizing and she decided it was quite possibly the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. She stared as long as she could before the intense light forced her to look away, two tears breaking free and running down her cheeks. In that moment, she felt as though the world was telling her everything was going to be okay.

"Day one," she whispered to herself with a smile as she unfolded herself from the bench seat and made her way back to bed.

Curling back up in Mike's arms, she met his eyes with a smile before laying her head on his chest. She felt his arms wrap just a little tighter around her and she closed her eyes with a smile and thought, *home*. The lab had never been home. The basement had served her well, but that was never home either. Even this house and this room, a place lovingly crafted just for her, wasn't quite it. This, right here, wrapped safely in Mike's arms: this was home.

17. Chapter 16

The sun had climbed high into the sky the next time they woke, bathing the room in a bright, clear light. Both unsure where to begin with the thoughts racing around their heads, they opted to say nothing for just a little longer, soaking in the comfort of the others presence. Eventually, despite the warm solitude, hunger drove them from bed and down to the kitchen. Even though neither had been all that focused on food during the trip home, it had now been a day and a half since the Upside-Down dinner El had fixed for them in the basement.

"I have to give you fair warning," Mike began as they made their way down the stairs, "I'm not a very good cook. Mom tried to teach me, and I tried to learn, but I just never got the hang of it."

El smiled at the awkward apology, knowing that whatever he fixed couldn't be any worse than what she had been living on. While Mike set to work gathering supplies to fix scrambled eggs and a few Eggos, she settled onto a stool at the island counter to watch. Her eyes scanned the room, running slowly across each of the clean surfaces. While the kitchen in Mike's old house had been slightly cluttered, it had a very lived-in feel. She could tell in one look around the room here, that Mike spent very little time in it. She had noted a similar feel to the living room when he had shown her around the night before, and now realized that while he had set up a home that would be warm and inviting with everything they would need to be comfortable, he had made little use of the space himself. When she would reach out through the Void to find him, he was almost always in the lab, or his shed in the backyard, toiling away at the search.

Her eyes found their way back around to the stove and watched Mike working a spatula carefully around the edges of the pan. She had found him with Will occasionally, and interacting with people at work. Years ago, she would sometimes find him with his family, and once in a while with Dustin and Lucas, but mostly he was on his own even back then. It struck her that even walking free in a world full of people, he had been alone all this time, just like her. Even more alone in one way, she thought; at least she had known he was out there

trying to find her. He had done it all without ever knowing if she was alive.

"Alright, breakfast is served," Mike announced with a warm smile as he carried two steaming plates over to the little table by the window.

Setting their breakfast down, he returned to the counter and brought over two mugs. El eyed the drinks suspiciously as he set them down. She recognized Mike's as coffee, the smell triggering familiar memories of the lab; a lot of Papa's assistants would drink that first thing in the morning. Her drink was something else, steam gently rising from a creamy brown liquid.

"Hot chocolate," Mike explained, seeing the hesitation on her face. "I think you'll like it."

He watched as she picked up the mug and slowly raised it to her lips, taking a small sniff as she did so. Deciding it smelled alright, and knowing Mike had never led her wrong when it came to treats, she took a small sip. The sweet, syrupy drink washed blissfully over her tongue, and she followed it up with a much longer swallow. Mike could see her cheeks pulling up into a grin behind the mug and fought to stifle a laugh when she lowered it, revealing a thin, chocolate mustache over her lip.

"Good," she said with a smile, suppressing a giggle of her own as she licked away the residue she could feel on her lips.

She decided hot chocolate might rank right up next to Eggos in terms of her favorite treats. She also thought it was fitting that chocolate pudding was the first thing she ate in the Upside-Down and now hot chocolate was her first taste back out; good or bad, chocolate meant change.

After taking another sip, El set to work on her breakfast and Mike followed soon after. They ate with gusto, both suddenly aware of just how famished they were. Aside from the clinking of forks, they ate in silence, El used to the quiet and Mike still wrestling with where to begin on all the questions running through his mind. In spite of Mike's warning to the contrary, El thought the eggs tasted just fine; she was just grateful for a meal that she didn't have to kill for herself,

or scavenge from what another predator left behind. Eventually, she sat back in her chair, barely halfway through her plate but uncomfortably full, not used to so much food all at once. Mike could read the discomfort on her face as she reluctantly picked up her fork and reached for another bite.

"El, it's okay," he gently assured, reaching out and softly taking hold of her other hand. "You can stop if you're full. I wasn't sure how hungry you'd be, so I made a lot. But you don't have to finish it all."

El set her fork down and looked up cautiously, making sure Mike really didn't mind her stopping. In the basement, she had always tried to get down whatever she had available, not knowing how much, if anything, there would be the next time she was hungry. Before that, she could still recall Papa getting angry with her when she didn't finish all her food, especially at breakfast.

"A growing girl needs to keep her strength up," he would explain in his ersatz loving tone.

She didn't read any falsehood in what Mike said, and reminded herself that food wasn't going to be the constant struggle it had been for so long. She watched as Mike finished his last few bites and took a long drink of coffee before clearing their plates from the table. He sat back down and fought to find his voice, desperate to decide where to start. In the end, it was El who broke the silence.

"You have questions," she said; a statement rather than a question.

She could see in his eyes he was struggling with how to begin, and she had a few questions of her own. He smiled gratefully.

"I do," he admitted. "Let's go sit in the living room, it's more comfortable in there."

They made their way into other room and settled on opposite ends of the couch, facing one another. Like the bed, El's first thought was how soft and comforting the seat was. She didn't have a frame of reference to compare with, but it felt brand new. Like the kitchen, though, she guessed it simply never got used. She looked up as Mike leaned forward and took a soft hold of her hand.

"I really don't know where to start," Mike began slowly. "I guess the first thing I want to know is just, are you okay? Like, I can't begin to imagine everything you've been through, and I know these last two days have probably been a lot to deal with all at once, but are you alright?"

El thought for a moment, forming an answer and trying to pull out the right words. It struck her that she had never been asked the question before. Sure, Papa had carried her back to her room when she had been over-exerted by a trial and stayed with her until he was certain she wasn't in any immediate danger. Mike had cared for her and made sure she was comfortable as she recovered from the storm and her exhausting trips into the Void. This was the first time though, once something was over and done with, she had been asked if everything was okay, and it brought a small smile to her face as she actually thought about the answer.

"Yes," she nodded, slowly. "I am. I will be."

"How?" Mike asked with a small shake of his head. "Sorry, not 'how are you okay.' But, how did you do it? I've been through a few versions of the Upside-Down and I can't believe a person could survive there. The dark and the cold would have driven most people insane. What kept you going?"

"I found you. I heard." El explained.

It was Mike's turn to stare, puzzled, trying to reason out what she meant.

"I found you, in here," she went on, tapping the side of her head. "You called me, and I heard. Almost every night. Sometimes more. You remembered me. You were going to find me. So I kept going."

El surprised herself with how freely the words poured out; she had learned plenty over the years listening to Mike, but had little opportunity to try them out for herself. Mike was stunned, never quite sure if he believed his messages had any chance of reaching her. He had sent them all the same, in the hope she would hear, but he knew crossing that gap to find Will had been an incredible effort. Knowing she had not only heard, but heard often and used it to keep

fighting, filled him with a warmth he hadn't felt in a long time. He also found himself running through all the things he had said over the years, suddenly self-conscious and hoping he hadn't said anything too embarrassing.

"I'm sorry I couldn't tell you I was there." El apologized, her face dropping again. "I tried, but it would make you go away."

Over the years, she had often returned to the reality of the basement with mixed feelings about her trip into the Void to find Mike. She would come back with a renewed sense of hope, knowing he was still trying to get to her, and that bubbly feeling she got in her chest from the kind, gentle things he would say to her. At the same time, she would feel a deep sense of guilt that she had no way to let him know she had heard, that she was still out there and knew he would reach her.

"How did you keep going?" she asked, turning Mike's own question back.

Over the years, she had watched him struggle with the doubt. He would put on a brave face when he reached out on the radio, maybe even believing the words himself, but the resolve would fall apart in the hours between. She didn't understand the significance, but she could almost feel the pain coursing through him when he would take drinks from the bottles hidden all over his house and the lab.

Mike turned the question over a few times before answering, simply "You. You kept me going. Knowing you were still out there."

He gave her hand a gentle squeeze as he spoke, his face brightening as he spoke.

"I could never explain it, but it was just a feeling, like you were standing right there with me. Everyone who knew about what happened, they all tried to tell me it was just wishful thinking. I'm sure they all thought I was crazy, especially when I started trying to build the portal to find my way to you. They tried to be supportive for a while, but they had their lives to go on with. In the end, it was just Will who stuck by my side, although I'm not sure even he fully believed me. But whatever else happened, the feeling like you were

there kept coming back and kept me moving forward."

Knowing he had felt her presence, even if he wasn't entirely sure it was real, took away just a little of the guilt she held.

"When things got tough, I just had to look at your picture and remember you were out there somewhere, waiting for me to bring you home."

As he spoke, Mike stood and crossed to the bookshelf, stopping in front of a group of picture frames. El had only passed her eyes over them briefly during the tour when they first got home, but now she watched as he picked up one from among the collection of family photos and brought it back to the couch. Unlike the rest, she realized this one was a detailed pencil drawing. The subject was the face of a girl with short-buzzed hair, familiar but from a time so far removed that it took her several seconds to recognize the wide, curious eyes staring back from the page. Her own eyes widened in surprise as she looked questioningly back at Mike.

"Will drew that for me after he was home, and better," Mike explained as El traced a finger gently down the glass. "He was able to do most of it from memory, from the night you found him. Dustin, Lucas and I were able to help him out with the finer details until we all agreed it was right."

El was stunned, staring down at her perfect likeness, carefully preserved on the page; she hadn't known if Will had even been able to see her that night in the Void. Her breath caught in her throat, thinking about the work she could tell went into the piece, and was touched that Dustin and Lucas had helped guide its creation. Guiltily, she realized that while there had always been concern in her mind for how Will was doing, and she focused whatever energy she could to checking on Mike, it had been a while since she had thought of the other two boys who had tried to help her to freedom.

"Where is everyone?" she asked.

"Everyone?" Mike asked; it took a second to realize what she meant. He tried to build a quick list in his head of everyone El had come to know during her week on the run from the lab. "Let's see. I guess Will

is the one to start with. He lives here in the city, just a few miles away."

Mike did his best to summarize the lives of the people who's lives had been forever changed by her extraordinary presence. He explained how, after everything that had happened, Will became a psychiatrist specializing in helping children who had been through traumatic situations. While Mike had helped in the ways he could, it had been the doctors Will saw in the years following his disappearance that made the most difference in his healing, and he wanted to pass that along to other kids in need. In high school, Jennifer Hayes got tired of waiting for Will to notice her, and asked him out to a movie, and they've been together ever since.

"Outside of the original group," Mike clarified, "she's the only one who knows about everything that happened. She and Will, both, are the reason I didn't go nuts years ago."

The mental image brought a grin to El's face, trying to picture Mike as anything other than level-headed and focused. True, she had seen him in plenty of moments where he was falling apart, but in her mind she always saw him as the confident boy who knew exactly what to do to make the situation right.

Mike moved on to the other, filling in a brief history of where each of them landed. Dustin had become a science teacher, taking his engaging humor to classrooms in Chicago. Just a few years ago, he had actually moved back to Hawkins to help take care of his mother, and took over Mr. Clarke's position at the middle school when he retired. Lucas started dating a girl named Max, who moved to town about a year after everything happened. After high school, they both went to college out in California so she could be closer to her dad, and they decided to stay. He teaches high school math and coaches the boys baseball team, while Max became a real estate agent.

Will's mom met back up with an old friend from high school named Bob. He was a down-to-earth, stable guy who brought a welcome normalcy to life that she needed to get over everything. They got married while Will was still in high school, and after everyone went off to college, they packed up and moved up to Maine to be by his family.

"I think, deep down, Joyce was never able to put the past behind her and needed to distance herself from Hawkins." Mike posited.

After college, Nancy and Jonathan decided to stay in New York, and got married a few years after graduation. Mike explained how Jonathan got a job as a photographer for a major news paper, while Nancy became a journalist, writing for several papers and magazines. He walked El through the details of their first project together, exposing enough of the lab's misdeeds to get the facility shut down and for them to admit their involvement in Barb's death.

"Whatever other details came out," Mike reassured her, "Nancy always kept you out of the story. I don't think she believed you were still out there, but she knew I believed, so for your safety, she kept you out of the story just in case."

El's head was beginning to spin as Mike ran down everyone's history. She was glad her friends had found happiness and purpose in their lives. She was comforted to know that both Will and Joyce had found people to help them recover and move forward from their experience, and she found herself touched beyond words that Nancy had been the one to get the lab closed for good, while continuing to protect the girl she barely knew. El also could see the struggle on Mike's face as he arrived at a name that didn't have such a happy outcome.

"Chief Hopper," Mike began slowly, trying to work out what he was going to say. "He did everything he could to help me with the search early on. I think he smoothed things over and kept me out of trouble more than once when I was caught breaking into the lab. But he's gone now."

Mike paused, swallowing hard; a decade later and the pain was still fresh. He and Hopper had been years apart and from two very different worlds, but they understood each other better than anyone. They both knew what the loss and the guilt felt like, and how it weighed them down. Most days it would be like floating in an ocean and the pain was a weight dragging them under. Where Hopper had eventually lost the fight and drowned, Mike had refused to give in, knowing his life wasn't the only one at stake. Sometimes he wondered if, as he was going under, it was Hopper that gave him one final push back toward the surface.

"He got really sick," Mike went on, "and he wasn't able to get better. He died about ten years ago. There's something you need to know about Hopper, and there's no easy way to say it. I didn't want to believe it myself, but I eventually confronted him about it, and it was true. Hopper was the one who told Brenner where to find you that night."

Mike explained how the Chief had come to the painful decision when there was no choice left and it was the only way they were going to get Will back alive. He stressed how Hopper had never intended to let Brenner lock her away again, and how he was going to do whatever it took to get her free. Mike fought for the right words to let her know how the guilt of that night drug him down the rest of his life, and how badly he wanted to apologize for how it all came about.

All the while, Mike watched El's face closely, trying to gauge her reaction to the news. He was a little concerned when the expected anger and hurt never materialized, and instead her face was masked with a sorrowful knowing expression. In truth, it was something she had known already, and come to terms with long ago; one of the many things she had heard during her visits reaching out to Mike. When she first found them discussing that fateful night, she had been furious at the betrayal, so much so she almost tumbled her mind out of the Void. At Hopper for handing her over when Mike said he could be trusted, and at Mike for not sharing her anger, knowing what the Chief had done. The moment passed, and she forced herself to listen, knowing Mike cared about her and would have a good reason for being so calm about the situation. In the end, she could hear the truth of it all in Hopper's voice, how much guilt he carried for what happened, and the unconscious clench of Mike's jaw as they spoke that assured her, while he understood and forgave, he didn't agree with the action. It took a while, but she eventually found her way to forgiveness for the Chief as well.

"Even in the end," Mike concluded, "he wanted you to know he never meant for any of it to happen. His last word were 'Tell her I'm sorry. I never meant it to happen.'"

"I'm so sorry kid." El finished, her eyes misting over. "I heard, that night."

She had known she would be exhausted for days after - dangerously so - but she had refused to leave their side that night, until the end. It startled Mike that she could find him even without the radio, though he had suspected it might be possible, and he took a small comfort that she had been there in those final hours.

"I think he saw me," she said hesitantly, "at the end. I told him I forgave him. I don't know if he heard."

Tears broke loose and ran down Mike's cheeks, knowing that at the very end, Hopper had found the absolution of forgiveness he had spent years trying to find at the bottom of a bottle. They sat in silence for a few minutes, hand in hand, both remembering the Chief as he had been and where the guilt had taken him in the end. Eventually, the tears gave way to small smiles.

"I think that's everyone," Mike said, brushing a tear from his cheek and trying to lighten the heavy feeling that had descended over the room.

El's face slowly fell again, one name still unresolved. She could have looked any time over the years, for the face forever burned in her mind. As bad as she wanted to know, she couldn't bring herself to find out. Even now, she was hesitant to ask, chewing her lip nervously. Mike saw the change come over her and thought hard about who he could have missed.

"Papa?" she finally asked in a small, timid voice. In an instant, twenty years fell away and she felt like the terrified little girl in the lab again.

"Brenner is gone," Mike reassured her, refusing to dignify his memory with a fatherly title. "The demogorgon got him, that night in the hallway at school. I saw his body myself when it was all over, and I've been to where he's buried a few times since just to make sure. He's really gone."

El nodded, fighting the tight feeling in her chest. It's what she thought had happened, but that night had been such a blur at the end. She had only been half-awake as Dustin whisked her down the hallway and she hadn't been sure she actually saw it take him down

or if it had been wishful thinking on her part. Knowing the truth, she found herself puzzled to find that after all this time, she still felt some sorrow at his loss. He had been a terrible person - the worst of the bad-men - but he had also been her Papa; growing up, he was all she had.

"The world never knew the awful things he did," Mike went on, "and he got a much more honorable burial than he really deserved. But he's gone."

El wiped at her eyes, pulling a smile back to her face. It was all so much to take in, but she was glad for knowing. Mike had assured her they would take things at whatever pace she needed, and she had no doubt they would talk more about all of them and she would get her feeling sorted out for each.

This time it was El who saw Mike's face struggling.

"Another?" she asked, now stumped herself as to who could be left.

"I'm not sure now is the right time," Mike answered, trying to delay the news, unable to predict what reaction it would bring. "This has already been a pretty heavy morning."

"Mike," she said, leveling a soft but firm stare. "Who?"

"Are you sure? It's pretty big, and it isn't something you can just forget once you know it."

Mike realized he was digging himself into a hole and the only way out was to tell her. El came to the same conclusion, suddenly regretting pushing him forward. Still, she nodded, urging him to continue. Mike took a deep breath and dove in.

"After the lab closed, I broke into the building quite a few times, trying to find whatever was left of Brenner's files. I knew if I had any hope of getting to you, I had to know whatever he did about your abilities. The things I found tucked away in his dusty notes were the foundation of everything it took to bring you home. But there were other things in his files as well."

El found herself leaning closer, her mind alive with the possibilities -

good and bad - of he might have found.

"El, I found your family." he revealed as delicately as he could. "Your mother, and your aunt."

Her thoughts exploded in every direction at once and she found herself willing the information away, mentally begging him to take it back. Growing up, she had asked Papa about family, and he had simply shaken his head 'no' and she had accepted it. Family were the people who loved and protected you, but that was for the regular children out in the world, who didn't have important things to do. She was strong and she only needed Papa to care for her. Now it turned out she had family of her own and she wondered, with an unexpected sting of betrayal, where they had been. Why hadn't they protected her? Why had they let Papa take her away?

Mike watched as the anger and sorrow, questions and hurt, all crossed her face. He had wrested with the decision over the years whether it was information he should bury, but in his heart he knew she deserved to know, no matter how much it might hurt. So he plowed forward, holding her hands in his own, pausing to let her process each new detail, and laid out everything he knew of the tragic story.

"You're mother's name is Theresa Ives," he began. "Her friends all called her Terry. And your aunt's name is Becky."

He explained their tragic history, as best he had been able to piece it together, between Brenner's files and Becky's own recollections. Her mother's initial involvement with the lab's early projects, and her own abilities, not as strong as El's but remarkable all the same. The pregnancy Brenner helped to conceal and nurture toward a child he hoped would have gifts beyond anything the world had ever seen. How, the day El was born, he stole her away and faked the records to convince the world she had been stillborn.

As Mike progressed through the narrative, El found herself drifting through first resentment then remorse as each piece of the story was laid down. She realized she could hardly blame them for letting her go if they thought she was already dead.

Mike kept going, too far into the story to stop and wondering if Will would have been able to put it more delicately than he was doing. In either case, it was too late to change narrators.

"Before you were born, your mother named you Jane." Mike went on, knowing he had to get this next part right. "You need to know just how much your mother loved you. Terry never believed for a second you were gone. She understood the kind of man Brenner was, and the lengths he would go to get to you; he told her as much just before it happened. When she couldn't get help from the police or from the courts, she took matters into her own hands and went to the lab to get you back herself. She broke in and shot a security guard trying to get to you, but Brenner's men got to her first."

"We don't know exactly what he did, he never put it down in any notes, but your mother was dropped off at a hospital a few days later. She was unable to speak any clear thoughts and barely reacted to the world. She could still hear, and would look when people spoke to her, but she would drift away almost immediately. Whatever he did, Brenner broke her mind permanently."

El took it all in, sitting in stunned silence. Hatred for her Papa fought for control against the sorrow for her mother. She had a name. She had family who loved her. She had a mother who had fought a human-monster trying to protect her, and had paid dearly for it.

"Where are they?" she asked, exhausted at the distressing narrative.

It was the question he knew was coming, and another answer that would hurt her. "Your Aunt Becky still lives nearby, just outside Fairmount. But your mom." He hesitated, knowing this was probably going to hurt worst of all. "I'm so sorry, El. She's gone. About six years ago."

She couldn't understand how it could hurt this bad, feeling such loss for someone she hadn't know existed twenty minutes ago, but her heart was breaking all the same. Tears fell unchecked as Mike wrapped her in his arms, holding her close and letting her grieve.

"I went to see them a few times," Mike continued gently. "Becky didn't like me much, at first. She still believed the cover story that

your mom had just overdosed on something, refusing to face the reality you were gone. She eventually came around after I showed her enough files from the lab to back up everything Terry had been saying for years, to anyone who would listen. I told your mother all about you. That would always bring her out of her state for a few moments and she could focus on what I was saying. I think somewhere deep inside, there was some part of her left that found peace knowing you were out there, somewhere. I promised her I would find you, and bring you home."

They sat for what felt like hours, wrapped in each others arms, as she worked through everything she had heard. Family and friends, love and loss, all branching out from her like roots from a tree. Countless lives connected to her even in her absence. Eventually her tears slowed, and she found herself wishing for the quiet serenity of the sunrise that suddenly felt like it was days ago.

Mike could feel her mood shift, suddenly becoming restless in the confines of the darkened living room, and he knew she needed a change of scenery. Will had said he should plant her a garden, something beautiful to offset the horrors of the world she had been trapped in. Now Mike found himself hoping it might help with the horrors of this world as well.

"Come with me," he said gently, taking her by the hand. "There's something I want to show you."

AN: I want to apologize for the delay on this chapter. For some reason, this was one of those chapters where I knew going in what I wanted to cover, and what needed to be said, but it still fought me tooth and nail going onto the page. Dialog isn't one of my strong suits (in writing or in life) so it took a while to get things down the way I wanted. This month has also brought a lot of family / home / work things to deal with, which left less time for writing than I would have liked and I thank you all for your patience.

That said, the next chapter might be a little delayed as well. I am working on something special, and a little different, to mark the one-month point on the countdown to S3. So I will be

finalizing that, to get it posted on June 4th. And now I've said it here, so come hell or high-water, I have to make myself hit that date.

As always, thanks so much for reading!

~darthstormer

18. Chapter 17

Days passed one into the next in much the same routine. They would sleep late and make their way downstairs for a quiet breakfast, just soaking in each others company. Then, they would talk. Sometimes they would only make it a few minutes before it all became too overwhelming, sometimes it would be nearing dinner before they looked up at the clock. They talked about life, what they had faced, and how they made it through. There were small smiles and plenty of tears, and quite often, a general numbness, not knowing quite what to feel. Still, they laid out their stories and helped the other to process as best they could. They each had moments where they had to draw back and withhold a detail, not to hide it from the other, but simply because they weren't ready to deal with it themselves.

At some point each day, when they couldn't face the past any longer, they would wind up in the garden. El had decided almost immediately the place was about as perfect as it could be, and Mike was quick to credit Will with the idea of a special place to call her own. The lush, green lawn of the backyard was surrounded on all sides by carefully tended beds of flowers, blooming with more colors than El thought possible. She marveled at the brilliance of the two rose bushes - their buds a vibrant purple and red - but in the end, she decided her favorite were the daisies. There was something charming about their clean, bright simplicity.

Sometimes they would sit curled together on the bench-seat Mike had built, resting comfortably on soft crimson cushions. Other times, El liked to stretch out on the grass, her arms spread wide, staring up at the brilliant blue sky until the light became too much to bear and then let her eyes gently close. The warm sunshine, fresh air and gentle breeze worked to recharge her, body and spirit. As much as she wanted to soak in the light, Mike was insistent on sunscreen before they ventured outside, explaining the pain of a sunburn and how vulnerable her skin would be having almost no exposure over the years. While it delayed their escape into the yard, El found herself enjoying the intimate closeness as Mike gently helped apply the creamy lotion to her face, ensuring her nose and cheeks wouldn't burn.

Dinners were usually a quiet, simple fare, drawing from the handful of meals Mike knew he could make well. Again, despite his apologies, El found nothing to complain about in the dishes he fixed her. To someone more accustomed to home-cooked meals, they might have been a little on the bland side, but the food was rarely burnt and El still appreciated the fact that it didn't require a dangerous trip out into the woods to gather.

After dinner, they would usually return to the living room for lighter discussions. They would talk of how life might proceed, now that she was home. They discussed how and when she would want to try venturing out into the world, the places that were safe to go and where best to hold off for now. El was in no hurry to leave the safe confines of the house and backyard, feeling secure in how they walled away whatever dangers the world might hold, but she also knew outside was the life she had longed to experience since her first tentative steps out of the lab.

It was during one of these twilight conversations that Mike pulled out a large manila envelope, settled onto the couch beside El, and began removing the items inside one at a time. The first out was a single key, attached to a stretchy red wristband.

"This is a key to the front door," Mike explained. "This is your home, you're not a prisoner here and you don't have to hide. I know you probably don't want to go out yet, but when you're ready, you are free to come and go as you please."

Next out of the envelope was a wallet, thin and black. Inside was a little money - two \$20 bills and a few \$5s - and a card with their address, phone numbers for him at home, his office and the lab, as well as a home number for Will and Jennifer. While El was aware of what money was, they would talk later about just what the different bills meant and how buying things actually worked. The same went for dealing with the contact information on the card. As Mike explained it, until she was ready, he was happy to accompany her out into the world and handle purchases if there was something she wanted. But again, when she was ready to step out on her own, the wallet was another key to her freedom.

Last out of the envelope were two pieces of paper - one large and one

small - clipped together. Both pages bore the name Jane Elizabeth Walker prominently at the top. Mike had paid good money to a top-notch source for the identity but it was worth every penny. Though the details were fabricated, and unfortunately couldn't include a reference to Terry Ives for safety, the birth certificate was genuine. It was fully registered in the state archives in Ohio and new certified copies could be requested or researched whenever needed. That document properly filed, he had faced no trouble then getting her an official Social Security number.

"I hope the name is alright," he began. "I had to pick something that would work, and I arranged for this quite a while ago. Your mom wanted to name you Jane, so I thought that was the only appropriate first name to use. With the middle name, you can go by Elizabeth, or shorten that to Beth, and it also still works to call you El."

He could read the confusion on her face, not knowing what the documents were or just what it meant for her.

"These pages are an official record of who you are," he continued, unable to think of a better way to put it. "When you're ready, these are enough to get an official photo id to add to your wallet, and that opens up the world to you. Someday, if you want it, you can use these to get a full driver's license, if you want to drive. You can use them to get a job, if that's something you want to do. You can use them to get a passport, if you want to travel and see the world."

A smile slowly spread across her face as the realization sank in of just how important these pages were, and she found herself holding them delicately by the edges. Mike went on, hoping to reassure rather than scare her.

"El, these two pieces of paper mean you exist; that you're a real person. They'll open doors to the things you want to do in life. But they also mean no one can ever make you disappear again, and claim you were never here."

She understood, and was both touched and overwhelmed at what the contents of the envelope meant for her. Not only had Mike brought her out of the darkness, he had smoothed the road out into the world for her as well. She wasn't just trading the basement for a more

comfortable home with a companion but still a different kind of imprisonment. He was giving her a life, the way he had promised all those years ago. Setting the items carefully aside, El threw her arms around Mike and whispered a heartfelt thank you.

The next day, feeling emboldened by her new gifts, El announced over dinner that she wanted to try leaving the house. Mike was wary of taking things too fast, so he suggested a short walk, just around the neighborhood as a first step and she readily agreed. She was all confidence and smiles as she locked the front door behind them using her very own key. Turning around, she faltered slightly, taking in just how daunting the world suddenly seemed. While it had been easy to venture outdoors into the safety of the backyard, that feeling of sanctuary was nowhere to be found on this side. Still, she reminded herself, she had marched right out of the lab and done fine, and this time she had Mike by her side.

She took a deep breath and stepped forward, starting down the driveway toward the street, Mike right next to her, watching her face closely. With each step, the doubts started to seep back in. As much as she tried to convince herself otherwise, she had been terrified leaving the lab; people got hurt, people had been killed, and she had even been contemplating going back to the lab when Mike had found her in the rainstorm.

Noises that seemed distant and muffled from the garden suddenly drew her attention this way and that as she stood in front of the house; a car driving past, a neighbor mowing their lawn, kids playing in a yard down the street. All were benign sounds, she knew that, but everything suddenly felt like it was happening at once. They reached the end of the driveway and prepared to turn onto the sidewalk when El came to a stop. Try as she might, she couldn't force herself to take another step.

"When I go out, bad things happen to good people," her mind kept repeating.

"I can't," she said sadly, lowering her head, ashamed. "I'm sorry."

"Hey, El, it's okay," Mike said, pulling her into his arms. "You don't have to apologize for anything. Look how far you came today," he

added, turning her to look back toward the house. "When you're ready, we'll try again. I know you'll go farther, one step at a time."

She looked up, and though the driveway wasn't long, the house did somehow feel far away and she felt a little better about how far she had made it on her first try. She waited a day, and tried again. They made it two houses away this time, before her nerves got the better of her. Little by little, she made it further each time they went out. A week later, when her nerves were telling her to turn back, Mike happily informed her they had come so far around the block, it was actually shorter to keep going forward to get home. The look of pride on her face that night, as they stepped off the sidewalk and back into their driveway, melted his heart and she was practically vibrating with excitement as she threw her arms around him.

Two days later, they were chatting idly in the kitchen while Mike scrambled some eggs for breakfast. El was working a short stack of Eggos through the toaster, quizzing Mike about just what he taught at the university. As best he could, Mike explained how he had chosen electrical engineering because it was good match for all the things he had already taught himself in the process of building the portal and all the equipment to search for her. It also left him in a prime spot to set up the kind of lab that would help out the search, at someone else's expense.

Mike carried their drinks over to the table, while El followed with her breakfast, and then he returned to gather his plate when the last of the waffles popped up in the toaster. On his way back, Mike hooked his foot on the edge of the cabinets and fell hard, the plate flying out of his hand. He threw his hands forward, bracing for an impact that never came. Instead, when he opened his eyes, he found he was hovering inches off the floor, the plate just beyond his outstretched hand with the eggs still in place and the waffles neatly stacked.

In the Upside-Down, every time El broke down and used her powers, it had been careful and deliberate. Actions took effort - far more than she had ever faced growing up in the lab - and recovery took a long time. The bulk of her strength she saved for reaching out to find Mike, the lifeline to her sanity. The rest, she saved for times of emergency, when it was the last thing she could do to defend herself. Sitting at the table, she found herself just as startled as Mike at how

easily it had come to her just then. She had seen him stumble, realized what was about to happen, and had caught him with nothing more than a thought. After recovering her senses, El gently lowered Mike and his breakfast to the floor.

"That's twice now you've caught me mid-fall," Mike joked good-naturedly, breaking the tension as he stood and gathered his plate.

A smile came to El's face as she thought back to the fateful day she caught him in the quarry. It had taken everything she had that day, to arrest his fall and drag him back up the cliff. By comparison, catching him now left her feeling unaffected in the least. Out of habit, she reached up to wipe at her nose and was puzzled to pull her hand away clean.

She thought on these developments over breakfast, and as the meal drew to a close, she found herself wanting a change in their usual routine.

"I," she began slowly, her mind racing and trying to decide how to phrase it. "Want to try my powers."

"Of course," Mike agreed, suddenly curious himself.

For the next few hours, El put herself to the test, starting with some of the simple exercises she had been subject to in the lab, then getting creative and inventing tests of her own. Mike pulled his car and the Jeep out of the garage to give them a place to work and the longer she worked, the more fun she found herself having. Something about the relief of having her abilities back at hand and coming easier than she could ever remember, paired with the knowledge that she got to use them when and how she decided, left her feeling light and playful in a way she had never felt before.

When Mike had put aside his dependence on alcohol, he had taken to drinking copious amounts of Diet Coke instead, so there was an ample supply of empty cans in the recycle bin for El to work with. The first time she had crushed a can for Dr. Brenner, it had left her exhausted with a bloody nose. In the garage, she quickly found a single can could be flattened without even looking. She followed that up with a whole line of cans, which proved no more difficult than the

first. In the end, she had Mike throwing several cans into the air at once, which she promptly slammed together and let fall as a single compressed chunk of aluminum.

She tried grabbing items from the garage shelves, two and three at a time, and pulling them into her hands. She would send them back to the proper places again, carefully setting them on the shelves where they belonged. At one point, she got a little too enthusiastic and almost sent a can of paint through the garage door, but she managed to grab it back just in time, only lightly denting the metal on the door. Mike stared on in amazement, joining in her infectious joy and found himself laughing along at her antics as she closed her eyes and gathered all the crushed cans into a careful pyramid.

"Go upstairs," she ordered with a grin, another idea coming to mind. "Sit at the desk in your room."

Mike smiled and went along with the request, assuming she was going to test out reaching out to find him in the Void as she had been doing from the Upside-Down for years. He thought about switching on the radio as he settled down at his desk, unsure if that was even necessary to help her tune in and find him. All at once, he found himself lifting into the air above his chair and realized she was still trying to figure out her physical limits. Slowly, he felt himself drifting out the door and down the hall, and decided if she was going to play around, he was game and would make it a challenge. Rolling onto his stomach, Mike put out his arms and began swimming against the current, imagining he was in a pool. As he expected, the movement was ineffective and he continued to drift down the stairs and around the corner into the kitchen. Mike rolled onto his back again and tucked his hands lazily behind his head to relax the for rest of his other-worldly ride. As he neared the door into the garage, it slowly swung open, and he found El sitting cross-legged, eyes closed and floating a foot above the floor. The smile on her face barely contained the laughter begging to break free.

She held them both as long as she could, but one look at Mike relaxing as though he were floating in a pool and she lost her grip. El dropped back to the floor and managed to catch Mike again, easing him the last inches before he smacked his head on the cold concrete. They sat and stared at each other for a moment before erupting into

laughter. It took a few seconds before Mike realized it was the first time he had ever heard her laugh, and the sound was like music to his ears. Floating Mike down from upstairs finally left El feeling just the slightest bit drained and brought about the familiar trickle of blood from her nose. Still, she felt better than she could ever remember, certainly better than she had since landing in the Upside-Down.

Recovering his breath, Mike stood and held out a hand, helping El to her feet and heading back to the living room to sit. The mess of crushed cans scattered around the garage could wait until later. As they sat on the couch, fighting back renewed giggles, El expressed her amazement at how much stronger and finely tuned all her abilities suddenly felt. Mike thought about for a few minutes, and came up with an analogy he thought would make sense for the situation. He explained how it was like a runner who trained with extra heavy clothes and weights on their ankles and torso. It built up muscles while practicing all the normal moves, strengthening without realizing it. Then, on race day, when the weights are taken off, everything is just that much easier. El had fought hard to maintain her abilities while shouldering the tremendous weights of the Upside-Down. Every action took an extreme effort and recovery was long and hard, but they had been silently building up the strength of her abilities at the same time. Now that she was free of those anchors, her abilities came easily and she could see the full strength she had built up during all the times that left her feeling exhausted and weak.

El thought about all this with a smile as she curled up to Mike's side on the couch. Though she knew she wouldn't be calling on them every day, there was a comforting relief in knowing her abilities were back, stronger than ever. Knowing that for the first time, her abilities were entirely her own, to use or not use as she saw fit, was liberating. Sure, she understood she couldn't just start using them freely out in public, but there was a feeling of security knowing they could be relied on if she found herself in a dangerous situation, after years living in fear of them failing at a critical moment.

Standing up from the couch, El crossed to the bookshelf and picked up a picture from the collection of framed snapshots. There was one more thing she wanted to try, suddenly curious about what had

always been her strongest ability.

"Is it okay?" she asked, tilting the frame and showing Mike the photo of Will and Jennifer at their wedding.

"Yeah, I think it's fine," Mike smiled. "I don't think he'd mind you checking up on him."

Settling back on the couch, El studied the photo for a minute, before sliding her eyes closed. Unlike in the Upside-Down, where even getting into the Void took an effort, she immediately found her feet slashing around the shallow waters that marked that realm. She called up the image of Will's face from the photo, and he came into focus almost instantly. Gone was the boy he had been when she first found him, scared and on the verge of death. As he sat at his desk, typing at his computer, El saw the man her sacrifice had allowed him to become. He stopped for a moment, looking around the room puzzled, as though he felt someone there, and she let her mind fall back to the reality of Mike's living room.

The smile on her face was undeniable - a mix of pride and glee at the confirmation of her enhanced abilities - and Mike thought it was time to make an offer he had been debating for a few days.

"Are you ready to meet him?"

19. Chapter 18

"They're here," Mike said gently, watching out the front window as Will and Jen pulled their car into the driveway.

El stood from the couch and walked over to where the living room met the front hall, fingers fidgeting nervously as she waited. She had hardly slept the night before, her mind running over all the things that could go wrong, meeting Will after all this time. Mike had lay awake with her in the dark, doing his best to help her talk out what had her worried. At the heart of it all, she still blamed herself for what happened to Will in the first place, and no matter how much Mike reassured her otherwise, she was terrified he blamed her too.

El stood on trembling legs, listening as Mike answered the knock at the door, ushered their visitors in and exchanged brief greetings. Footsteps started her way, and for just an instant, she was struck by the urge to run. Before she could decide just what to do, the moment passed and they were there. El's eyes locked with Will's, 20 years fell away, and she could see the face she fought so hard to find through the bath. Will, too, saw past the years and recognized the face that had found him in his darkest hour, reassuring him that help was on the way, and he just needed to hang on just a little longer.

"I guess after all this time, official introductions are in order," Mike began, breaking the silence. "El, this is Will, and his wife Jennifer."

He had to pause and clear a lump in this throat before continuing with words he'd waited decades to say. "Will, Jennifer. This is El."

Stepping forward and fighting his rising nerves, Will held out his hand. "I'm happy to finally meet you, El. Mike's told us all about you."

El stepped forward and, after a moment of hesitation, bypassed his offered hand and threw her arms around him. Will reciprocated and wrapped his arms around the girl he owed his very life.

"Thank you," El whispered, "for taking care of Mike."

"You're welcome," Will answered quietly, "Mike took just as much

care of me."

Parting their embrace, El surprised everyone when she turned and wrapped her arms around Jen. "Thank you for taking care of both of them."

Jennifer wrapped her arms warmly around El in return. "You're welcome, El. Thank you for finding Will for us."

They were unusual greetings, to be sure, but the four of them had faced a journey that was far from ordinary. Moving into the living room, El settled in her usual place at one end of the couch, and Mike offered Will the other end. The two eyed one another, neither sure where to begin, both eager to thank the other, while apologizing for the parts they had played in what happened.

Seeing the hesitation on both their faces, Jen put a hand on Mike's shoulder. "I think maybe they need a few minutes."

"Is that alright with you?" Mike asked El, making sure she was okay by herself with Will.

El gave a nod, relieved that they could talk for a minute, just the two of them.

"Alright," Mike smiled. "We'll just be in the kitchen if you need anything."

Following Jen out into the hall, they stopped and gathered the bags of groceries the Byers had brought with them.

"Thanks for picking this up on your way," Mike began as they headed for the kitchen. When arranging a time for them to come over, he had passed along a shopping list as well, the refrigerator starting to run bare. "I don't know if she's ready to face a trip through the store yet, and I don't know about leaving her home while I go, either."

Mike thought for a minute, then clarified, "I'm sure she'd be fine here by herself for an hour. I'm not sure *I'm* ready."

Jen gave Mike a knowing nod and began to unload the bags onto the counter, separating out the fridge, freezer and pantry items from each

other. She watched Mike as he began putting the items away, trying to get a read on how he was really doing.

"So you really did it." Jen began as Mike put the last of the items into the cupboard and closed the doors. "And she's actually real."

"You didn't believe she was real?" Mike asked in surprise.

Jen gave a laugh at the defensive question. "No, it's not like that. I came into the story way to late to have an opinion one way or the other. While you were all fighting to save the world and bring Will back, I was at home, crying into my pillow that the boy I liked was gone and he never even knew how I felt about him."

"Will may have taken a while to come around and realize a girl might actually like him despite his zombie-boy reputation, but I saw the way his eyes lit up when he first woke up in the hospital and we told him you were at his funeral." Mike offered.

"It always just seemed so fantastical," she went on. "Like something from your comics. Come on, a girl with superpowers, who could move things with a thought, fight inter-dimensional monsters and find people with just her mind. Be honest, you'd be at least a little skeptical if you hadn't seen it for yourself. But the way you guys talked about El, no, I always knew she had to be real. And, of course, it was hard to be skeptical any more after stepping through one of those portals of yours."

"How is she doing, really?" Jen asked, her tone more serious with concern.

"El is...she's actually doing good. Really good, considering she's spent the last twenty years stuck in an utter hell. Some days feel like two steps forward, one step back, but she's a fighter. She has a lot to learn about how the world works, and to recognize that every sound and unexpected movement isn't something trying to kill her. But really, she's doing amazing."

"Anyone strong enough to survive a place like you and Will have described is going to be strong enough to survive the transition home." Jen complimented. Then, getting more serious. "What about

you? How are you doing?"

"Terrified," Mike answered, trying to play it off with a laugh he knew Jen saw right through. "Worried about whether I'm strong enough help guide her through all this. Worried about doing or saying something that scares her, or makes her feel unsafe. Terrified of losing her all over again."

Smiling again, he added, "And happy. Unbelievably happy. Happier than I ever thought possible. Twenty years ago, I met the most amazing girl I would ever have the good fortune to know, and then lost her to forces beyond imagination. Now I have her back and I feel whole for the first time in my life."

"Have you told her that?" Jen asked.

"More or less," Mike admitted. "Not those exact words."

"Well tell her. Those exact words. Tell her, and there's no possible way you'll ever lose her."

"Thanks Jen. Really. For everything."

"That's what I'm here for," she said with a mock-satisfied air.

"So," Jen went on, nudging Mike's shoulder, "you weren't kidding about how pretty she is."

That brought a rosy blush to his cheeks and a twinkle to his eye.

In the living room, El and Will sat in silence, minds racing about where to begin.

"I'm sorry," they both began in unison.

They let out a small laugh at their shared guilt, and Will held out a hand, gesturing for her to continue.

"I'm sorry, El began again. "I'm sorry I opened the gate and let the demogorgon out. I'm sorry it took you."

"You have nothing to apologize for," Will consoled. "Mike's told me

all about the things that happened to you in the lab, the way you were forced to push your mind out and try to make contact with that thing. There's no way you could have known what would happen and you shouldn't have been put in that situation to begin with."

"I'm sorry too," he went on, "for getting captured and forcing you to come find me. I know if that hadn't happened, you wouldn't have been in the school that night and everything would have turned out different. So, I also want to thank you. Without even knowing me, you put your life on the line and you saved me."

He had lay awake the night before as well, trying to find the right words to thank her, and even after all that practice he found he was getting choked up, tears threatening to spill out all over again.

"Thank you, El. Thank you for coming to find me, and for giving me my life. I knew I was on the verge of death, huddled in that fort in the woods. I was on the verge of giving up, when a girl in a pink dress stepped out of the darkness and took hold of my hand. She told me my mother was coming, and to hold on just a little longer, then she vanished in a swirl of mist. I knew I was dying and my mind had to be playing tricks on me. Then I woke up in the hospital and Mike told me all about what you had done, and I knew you were real."

His tears were falling now, but he hardly cared. El's own fell freely, touched by his outpouring.

"You saved me that night. You traded your life for mine without a second thought, and I can't ever begin to thank you."

El leaned forward, wrapping her arms around Will and pulling him close. They held one another in mutual guilt and gratefulness until they each had a shoulder soaked with the others tears.

Eventually pulling back, Will wiped at his eyes and went on. "I don't know how much Mike has told you about what I do now, but I help people talk about their feelings and work through terrible things that have happened to them. Normally I work with children, but I want to make an exception for you. If you ever need to talk, about anything at all, you can call me. Mike has all my numbers to give you. Anytime, day or night, you can always call. I know all too well,

getting out of the Upside-Down doesn't magically erase everything that happened, but I'm ready to help if you need it."

"Thank you," El smiled. A guilty weight she had been carrying around for twenty years was gone and she felt yet another step closer to home.

The groceries put away and the more difficult conversations complete, the four of them gathered in the living room to talk. To Mike's great relief, El had warmed instantly to both Will and to Jennifer. Mostly she listened as the others discussed the more mundane aspects of life that had nothing to do with portals or monsters or the heartbreak of the past. As the conversation came around to work, she threw out questions of her own, eager to understand even more about what it was they did. Already, El was finding herself curious about just what regular people did with their lives. All she had ever been exposed to were the scientists and doctors in the lab, and to Chief Hopper, though she still wasn't sure exactly what it was he did.

After the Byers went home, Mike took El back up to her room, deciding it was the right time to teach her about the telephone sitting on her bedside table. He had her get the little card of numbers from her wallet, and they sat together on the edge of the bed while he explained how pressing the numbers in the right order would connect you to the person you wanted to talk to. He had her try out the number at his office, knowing that one would go straight to voice-mail.

"It's you!" she said in surprise, when the message began to play.

"That's me," Mike agreed. "If I'm not in my office when you call, the answering machine picks up. After it plays a loud beep, it will record whatever you say, and I'll be able to listen to it when I get back."

Right then, he could hear the tone come over the speaker and he showed El how to hang the phone back up to end the call.

"So that's how you dial when you have the number in front of you," Mike continued. "But these buttons up here, have a few numbers saved, so you don't have to remember them."

He walked her through the speed-dials he had set up for her, mostly the same as those on her card. His office, his lab, Will's office, and Will and Jen's home phone, were all preset in the phone. He reiterated Will's offer, that she could call him any time she needed to talk; if there was anything she didn't feel like she could talk to Mike about or just needed another opinion on, she shouldn't hesitate to reach out to either him or Jennifer.

Smiling at her new connection out into the world, El picked up the receiver again and pressed the number for Mike's office. He watched the smile growing on her face as his voice came back across the line. This time, when the beep came, she left him a short message.

"Hi Mike. Thank you for teaching me the telephone."

Mike was beaming as she hung up the phone and wrapped her arms around him again. Holding her in his arms, Mike vowed to never delete that voice mail.

The next night, emboldened by a successful meeting with new people, Mike made the offer of a dinner out and El happily accepted. Climbing into his much quieter, and far more comfortable car, they made the short drive to a place Mike had frequented over the years. Golden Teak Thai was popular with the lunch crowd, but by dinner the place was usually quiet, with just a few neighborhood regulars. The non-existent crowd, combined with a friendly wait-staff who never rushed customers, made for a quiet and low-pressure introduction to a world outside of Mike's kitchen. After patiently going over the menu cover to cover and helping her pick something she'd like, Mike placed their orders with the waiter and El discovered the flavorful treat a well-seasoned dinner could be. While she would never turn her nose up at a meal Mike made for her, she understood a little more where his own hesitations about cooking came from. All in all, the evening out was a resounding success and went a long way in boosting El's confidence stepping out into the world.

A few days later, Will and Jen came by again for an afternoon BBQ. Jen brought a few new bags of clothes for El, now that they knew the right sizes, and a promise to take El out shopping to pick out some items for herself once she was ready. El and Jen went upstairs to try things on. After they had retired to El's room, Will explained that Jen

also wanted to have a little woman-to-woman talk that the men agreed neither of them were all that qualified for. When they came back down, El had changed into a breezy white blouse and a pair of navy-blue shorts, and the content smile on her face left Mike enraptured. He also couldn't help but notice that, after their girl-talk, every time his eyes caught El's, she would get a shy little smile on her lips and a blush to her cheeks.

El was startled to find, when talking with Jen, how normal and easy it all felt. With Mike and even with Will, there was always the underlying tinge of their shared history, not that there was anything wrong with that. With Jen though, all the history was second hand and she didn't let any of that form the basis of their relationship. El could imagine that Jen talked to her the same way she would any other friend. The normalcy felt good and left her with a light feeling in her heart.

They moved to the backyard, and while El, Jen and Will took seats at the patio table, Mike worked at the grill tending to a set of steaks. It was a simple enough operation, and one of the meals he could actually pull off well. All the same, he got distracted joining in the conversation, and only came back to his senses when he spotted the stunned look on Will and Jen's faces. Turning around, he noticed the steaks lifting off the grill and turning themselves over, one at a time.

"You were letting them burn," El teased, smiling, as she wiped at her nose with a napkin.

Will and Jen stared at each other in disbelief, confirming the other had seen it too, then turned to look first at El then Mike. All four burst out laughing at the casual domestic application of her supernatural abilities.

"I'd say you get used to it," Mike joked. "But you really don't."

The next week, Will and Jen came by again, this time with a single bag, the contents of which were a secret from Mike. It was something El and Jen had discussed on their last visit and the girls retired up to El's room to work on the surprise.

"So you're not going to tell me what this is about?" Mike asked Will,

as the door to El's room clicked shut.

"Nope," Will said, a satisfied smile on his face. "El is already conspiring against you, and I've been sworn to secrecy."

Walking over to a second bag Mike hadn't noticed, sitting just inside the front door, Will pulled out the bottle of whiskey that had been sitting untouched in his study for weeks now.

"So, now that she's home, what do you want to do with this?" he asked, handing the bottle over to Mike.

Taking the bottle from Will, Mike studied the label thoughtfully for a minute, remembering all the ways it had helped and hurt him over the years. It had been a crutch, getting him through when he thought nothing else could, but it had taken so much out of him at the same time. In answer, Mike turned and started toward the kitchen, twisting off the top as he went. Will followed behind and watched as Mike removed the lid and upended the bottle, letting it drain down the sink.

"I drank this to forget," Mike said. "I don't want to forget; I want to remember everything."

Will took a step closer and clapped Mike on the shoulder. "Good answer. I'm proud of you Mike, I really am. And the offer I made El the other day, that offer goes to you too, you know. If you ever need to talk, you call me, got it? Just because she's home now, doesn't mean I'm done helping. You pulled me through everything when we were kids, I'm not about to stop helping either of you now, whatever I way I can."

"Thanks Will," Mike said, reaching out to shake Will's hand. Then, thinking better of it, Mike pulled his friend into a hug instead.

"Alright softy," Will teased, patting Mike's back. "Save the hugs for her."

It was almost an hour later when Jen finally came back down the stairs and directed Mike to stand in the middle of the living room. Standing behind him and putting her hands gently over his eyes, she

called up the stairs, "Okay, you can come down now."

Mike waited in eager anticipation as he listened to El descend the stairs and step into the room. Whatever the three of them had planned, it had to be something special. After dragging out the suspense just a little longer, Jen pulled her hands back and Mike felt his heart stop for an instant. El had traded the t-shirt and shorts she had been wearing for a stunning dress, bluish-gray with a red belt. The silvery hair that fell nearly to her waist had been trimmed to just above her shoulders, bouncing lightly with a natural curl. The lightest touch of makeup graced the soft features of her face - far gentler than he had done when they were getting ready to sneak into the school - just a hint of blush, a shade above her eyes and a faint pink to her lips.

El stood unsure, trying to judge Mike's silence. Her eyes darted nervously to Jen's, but the reassuring smile she greeted her let El know Mike's speechlessness was a good thing.

"El, you look..." Mike trailed off, at a total loss for words.

"Still pretty?" she asked nervously.

"El, you look beautiful."

El smiled, pleased Mike liked the change. In the Upside-Down, she had resorted to hacking her hair shorter with a knife when it got too long to manage, but talking to Jen during their last visit, she had confessed wanting to shorten her hair to something more manageable. Jen had readily agreed to come by and give El's hair a proper trim, and teach her how to style it for herself. The dress and the makeup were a surprise to El and she had been quick to thank her for the thoughtful addition. Jen had also offered to color her hair, returning it to something closer to her natural dark-brown, but El decided to keep with her natural color. Mike had explained how the lack of light and sparse diet had played havoc with the coloring, and she decided to keep things as they were and just let time decide what her hair would do.

It was quickly decided the four of them would treat themselves to dinner out and El requested the Thai place again, the restaurant

already feeling familiar and safe. Mike rushed upstairs to clean up and change into something deserving of her amazing look, though he knew nothing he could put on would hold a candle to her. Dinner was just as delicious as last time, and the added company left El feeling that pleasant, normal, feeling she couldn't get enough of. Mike watched with adoring eyes as she talked and laughed with their friends, the smile never fading from her face through the evening. Whatever bumps they may hit along the way, he knew that El was truly going to be alright.

Standing on the front porch, Mike's arm around her shoulder, they waved a final goodbye as Will and Jennifer backed out of the driveway and headed down the street. He gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze before they turned and headed inside, Mike stopping to lock the front door behind them. El slipped out of her shoes and made her way over to the couch, her mind buzzing from the evening. Sharing dinner with friends, they had kept the conversation light and put aside talk of either the past or the future. Sitting on the couch, she closed her eyes and tried to memorize every detail of the moment, one where she was truly and completely happy. There had been so few in her life, but they seemed to suddenly be coming more frequently.

As she opened her eyes again, she spotted Mike standing in the middle of the room, watching her with a smile of his own. He also appeared lost in thought, wrestling with a decision.

"What?" she asked with a small laugh.

In answer, he turned and walked over to the bookshelf and started adjusting the controls on the small stereo tucked off to one side. The room was filled with low music as Mike twisted the knob first one way and then the other, tuning in a station that would suit his purpose. Finally satisfied, he turned the volume up just a little more and then turned back to El, who was giving him a puzzled look.

"It's long overdue, but I believe I promised you a dance," he said with a grin, stepping over to the couch and extending a hand to her.

El thought for a moment, remembering the promise and his stumbling explanation about the Snow Ball dance at the school, the

one he had been so sure they would go to together.

"I don't know how," she said, hesitating as she reached out her hand to his.

"That's alright, I'll show you what I know, and we'll figure out the rest together," he said, gently pulling her to her feet. "I'm not that great at it anyway."

The Party had refused to let Mike skip out on their senior prom, though they had to practically drag him there at gunpoint. Max and Jen had each taken a song and danced with him at one point in the evening. He appreciated what they were doing - what all of them were doing - but it only made him more aware of who he really wanted to be there with him.

Mike led El to the middle of the living-room as one song faded out and then next came in - My Girl - a fitting song to be sure. He guided one of her hands to his shoulder and took hold of the other gently in one of his own, placing his other carefully at her waist. They began to sway along with the beat, nervous and unsure at first but soon relaxing in each others arms and letting the music flow through them. Feeling emboldened by the day and the closeness of her touch, Mike found himself softly mouthing along with the refrain.

"I. Guess. You'd say. What can make me feel this way?"

"My Girl." he said softly, staring deep into her eyes and leaning her back in a shallow dip.

El felt only an instant of panic as he leaned her backward, but it was washed away by the warm safety of his arms. She knew he had her, and would let nothing bad happen. The song faded out and the next came in, a slower ballad, and Mike pulled her in closer, swaying to the beat and recognizing just what a perfect fit it was for the moment.

Have I told you lately that I love you?

Have I told you there's no one else above you?

Fill my heart with gladness, take away all my sadness.

Ease my troubles, that's what you do

For the morning sun in all it's glory

Meets the day with hope and comfort too

You fill my life with laughter, somehow you make it better

Ease my troubles, that's what you do

There's a love less defined And its yours and its mine Like the sun

Mike looked deep in El's perfect brown eyes and found his heart welling up with more happiness than he'd ever dared hope his life could hold.

"El, there's something I've been needing to say. For a while now, actually. I've been trying to find the right way, but, I don't know, maybe there isn't some perfect way but you just have to say it anyway."

El looked at him, puzzled at the sudden shift in his expression as he fought to sort out the right words. It was a look she had seen on his face before, that night in the school, and it warmed her heart to know whatever he was about to say was something special she would always remember.

"I mean, I guess I've said it before but on the radio, and I wasn't even sure you would hear it. But now, in person, it just..."

Mike knew he was rambling so he pulled a deep breath and took the plunge. "El. I love you."

A warm smile pulled across her face; it was what she had been sure was coming, but to hear the words out loud and in person, she felt like she was suddenly melting inside. Slipping a hand up behind his neck, and stretching high on tiptoes, El pulled her lips to Mike's. Where the first kiss they had shared at the school was brief and impulsive, this one was long, slow and deliberate. The music continued behind them but neither noticed as the whole world seemed to fade away until nothing remained but the two of them held tight in the others arms. As soon as their lips separated, they felt

the emptiness between them and closed the gap again, meeting for another kiss, then another.

When they finally parted, El pulled her hand around to the side of Mike's face, cradling his cheek. "I love you too, Mike."

AN: Just like this chapter, I need to put out a sorry and a few thanks.

An enormous thank you to those of you who have stuck with the story thus far and continue to leave such supportive and wonderful comments. They really do help motivate me through the next chapter, when I have moments of doubt as to whether I can pull this story off.

In that same vein, an apology to those who's comments have been going un-answered. I set a goal to myself to try and respond to as many as I could, but I've been letting it slip the last few chapters. I'm going to try and be a little better about that moving forward, though I know better than to make promises I'm not positive I can keep. We're all friends here, and friends don't lie.

Lastly, a bit of an unusual thank you, that I'm not sure the recipient will ever see. I want to send a thanks out into the world to the staff at Golden Teak Thai in Tacoma, WA. Like the restaurant in this chapter, they're usually empty in the dinner hour, and they've never been anything but polite as I've taken up a table far longer than necessary, sketching out chapters and new story ideas over dinner. Like Twelve before it, this story has very much been fueled by massaman curry and hot sake.

20. Chapter 19

It's not to say that every day was perfect, and life was nothing but sunshine and Thai food for Mike and El. The decades had left them scarred, in body and spirit, and they had to work through those scars one by one. During the day, they could safely face down their inner demons together. Nights tended to be harder, as sleep let their subconscious paint a fog over the things they had yet to work through and play them out for a captive audience.

It took a few days after El got home before the nightmares came, but they came all the same. Not that she had been aware of it, but in the Upside-Down El had not often let her mind sink deep enough for dreams - good or bad - to come. Even in sleep, she had to be on constant guard for the slightest sign of danger, so her mind had spared her from distraction. Whatever went on in the dark depths of her subconscious, she wasn't aware of it as she dozed and listened. Now, in the quiet safety of her room and Mike's warm embrace, her fears were free to take shape and her brain played out all the horrors it could imagine.

In the muddled confusion of sleep, she would find herself back in the basement, living out all the what-ifs she hadn't let herself dwell on before. What if she got hurt, or sick, and was too weak to take care of herself? What if she wasn't strong enough, or brave enough, to hold on until Mike could get to her. What if something got into her sanctuary, and she wasn't able to fight it off? There were terrible dreams where, in a moment of desperation, her powers failed her entirely. The worst were the ones where she would reach out to Mike and she could no longer find him. Days would pass in the dream, and she would come to the horrifying realization that she was now completely, and utterly, alone.

These nights, El would wake with a scream in her throat, clawing her way back into consciousness. Thankfully, Mike was always right there to gather her in his arms and soothingly reassure her everything was alright. Some nights, her heart-rate would slow, her breathing would return to normal, and she could settle back to sleep in the safety of his embrace. Other times, the monsters would reappear as

soon as she tried to close her eyes, and Mike would raise the lights in the room and they would cuddle together and pass the final hours of darkness awake, sometimes talking, sometimes just in quiet contemplation.

Mike, too, found himself plagued by fresh nightly specters, once El was home. For twenty years, he had faced down the dream about the night she went away. He knew it inside and out and could process whatever new revelations it gave. What Mike didn't expect, were all the nightmares his mind had held at bay during all that time, leaving him to focus on the important message she had been trying to tell him. With El home, all the other fears finally got to take their turn, manifesting in the depths of his subconscious.

Bad were the dreams where he never found her, or he took too long and the Upside-Down had twisted her into some feral creature beyond help. Worse were the ones where he was too late, and found her in the basement refuge in the final moments of disease or injury. He would whisper heartbreaking apologies and she would stare back at him, eyes full of accusation - it could have been alright if only he had come sooner. By far the worst dream, he would be searching the school and find her bones, not the remains of the woman she'd become, but of the girl he had first met. In the nightmare, he somehow knew she had been fatally wounded in the fight to kill the demogorgon. She had come to the other side and tried to keep going, but only made it as far as the hallway just outside the classroom door before she fell.

This last one was the worst, and left him sobbing her name into the darkness. El would gently drag him awake and rock him in her arms until the dream faded. It was a nightly give and take, each playing their part in comforting and being comforted. One by one, they played out their fears and reminded themselves those things would never come to pass.

As bad as the nightmares could be, there was a second problem that cropped up and haunted their sleep. El had spent decades training herself to detect the slightest sounds and hints of movement as she slept; she knew early on, if something found its way into the basement while she slept, the results could be fatal. Nightmares only messed with her perception, blurring the lines between the safe

reality of her room and the monsters in her head. Rolling over in his sleep one night, Mike triggered her defensive reactions with painful results. Snapping awake, El rolled free of the mattress, landing hard on the floor. As she fell, her mind still in a fog, El reached out and grabbed Mike, flinging him hard against the far wall. When she had to lean on her powers in the Upside-Down, she could only hold an attacker at bay for a few seconds before her strength would ebb away, so she had to act quickly. Rushing forward, El threw herself at Mike, pinning him with a forearm to the throat, holding him in place as she fumbled for one of the knives on her belt. Only when her hand came back empty, unable to locate the blades she no longer carried, did her mind finally clear enough to realize what was happening. The dark shadows and vines dissolved away to clean walls and bright curtains. Her attacker faded too, fur, claws and teeth disappearing to reveal Mike, deathly pale and struggling to get free.

"Mike!" she gasped weakly, releasing her hold and stepping back slowly.

Mike dropped to the floor, coughing hard and fighting to catch his breath. El watched him struggle back to his feet, horrified at what had almost happened, and then turned and ran from the room.

"El!" Mike called out, throat raw. "El, I'm okay."

Running down the stairs, Mike glanced at the front door, before deciding she hadn't gone that way. He paused, listening hard, and could hear the sounds of the night coming in through the open kitchen door. Stepping outside, he found her sitting in the dewy grass, knees pulled to her chest.

"El, it's okay," he said soothingly, kneeling beside her and folding his arms around her. "I'm okay."

"Mike, I'm sorry. I almost..." she trailed off, body shaking as she struggled to control her heart, pounding hard in her chest.

"El, it's not your fault. Look at me." he said gently. She looked up slowly, eyes wet with tears. "El, I knew things like that were going to happen. It will probably happen again. But that's not you doing it, it's everything that's happened to you."

"I don't want to hurt you." she whispered, wiping at her eyes.

"El, I'm okay, really. I'm not afraid of you. It's a few bumps, nothing more. Being thrown into the wall hurt a lot less than you being gone."

El smiled weakly as Mike helped her up and they went back inside. The sky was already turning pink, so they decided to forget about sleep for the night. Instead, after changing into some dry clothes, they gathered in El's window seat with a steaming plate of Eggos and watched the sunrise. They agreed it was a perfect start to the day following a terrible night.

As Mike guessed, it happened again, and again. It wasn't every night, and Mike learned quickly how to deal with the situation the best he could. The first time, he had fought hard, survival instincts kicking in and forcing him to put up some kind of defense. With practice, he found that the less he struggled and the more he spoke to her, the faster the dream would fade and she would come back to him. It was challenge getting his head on straight in the middle of it all, considering he usually woke up mid-flight, but in time, it became second-nature.

At one point, El sadly informed Mike she wanted to try sleeping on her own. As much as the thought scared her, she was more worried about injuring him. He expressed his concerns, letting her know he would do that, if it's what she wanted, but she didn't have to be alone just to protect him; he reminded her, he wasn't afraid of her. Still, she wanted to try all the same. They said goodnight in the hallway, and retired to their separate rooms. Mike sat on the edge of his bed, wrestling with his conscience. He wanted to give her the space she asked for, but worried about leaving her on her own to face down the demons, and was terrified at the prospect of dealing with his own. As much as he wanted to be there for her, he knew he needed her, too.

Unable to stand it any longer, Mike walked over to his door, drawn to her by a force he couldn't begin to explain. Twisting the knob, he nearly collided with El, standing just outside, wrestling with her own decision to knock

"I can't." she said, simply.

"I know," Mike said, taking her in his arms. "Me neither."

That night, El joined Mike in his room for a change. As much as she adored her own room, there was something comforting about his space. She had found him there so many times over the years, it felt familiar and safe. It's where he called her at night on the radio. It's where she would often find him on quiet nights when she could risk spending the extra energy to reach him a second time. For a blissful night, the dreams stayed away.

The mental scars ran deep, for both of them, but it was something they were working through. They discussed the dreams with Will one quiet afternoon, and he gave them a few suggestions, while commending them on how far they were already coming. There were other scars, too, that gave them trouble; shallow but far more visible and harder to ignore. As El spent time in the backyard, soaking up the warm Indiana sunshine, her skin picked up a light golden tone. She liked the look, an ever deepening reminder that she was out in the world, free of all the dark places she had been a captive. At the same time, all the scars she had acquired on her skin, the marks of a thousand terrible memories, refused to pick up any of the new color. Instead, they stood out bold, a bright white against the darker surrounding skin.

It had been a warm afternoon spent out in the garden, and El had decided she wanted to shower before dinner. Mike had stayed downstairs, giving her first dibs on the hot water, while he arranged a fresh bunch of daisies for the kitchen table. As he climbed the stairs and passed her open door, he spotted her standing in front of her mirror, still in her shorts and a bra, her shirt piled down by her feet. He stifled a small laugh, realizing that privacy was one habit she'd probably never fully pick up. Mike was just reaching for the doorknob to pull it shut for her, when he caught sight of the sad expression on her face.

As she turned her body, first one way, then the other, El ran a finger lightly across the lines that remained from wounds long past. She didn't like the marks, each one a reminder of things she'd rather forget. She and Mike could talk about the things that had happened to them through the years, come to peace with the details, and tuck the memory away on a shelf; not necessarily gone, but out of their

daily thoughts. The scars, on the other hand, only grew bolder as time went by. She could look at each one and recall the circumstances that had left the new mark. She also couldn't explain it, but she worried Mike wouldn't still find her pretty with all the marks. It was a ridiculous fear, she knew that, but the thought nagged at her all the same.

"Ugly," she whispered, tracing a long pair of lines down her side.

Putting aside thoughts of privacy for the moment, Mike stepped into the room and crossed to her, startling El. It distressed him that she even knew the word, and broke his heart that she'd ever use it to describe anything about herself.

"There not ugly," he said, pulling her into his arms. "They're a part of you, so they could never be ugly."

"I don't like them," she said sadly. "I don't like remembering, and they won't go away."

"Come on, come sit" Mike said, taking her by the hand and leading her over to the edge of the bed.

"So what is it about them that makes you sad?" he asked, gently.

"They make me remember. Times I got hurt. Times something got me. Times I wasn't fast enough, or strong enough; times I was too weak to protect myself." she said, eyes downcast.

"El, scars aren't a sign of times you were weak, they're a reminder of times you were strong."

She stared at him sceptically, trying to follow his train of thought; if she'd been strong enough, the bad things wouldn't have happened. Mike could see by the look on her face, she didn't believe him, so he tried another tactic.

"Tell me about this one," he asked gently, taking hold of her hand and pointing to a jagged line running up her arm, just above the wrist.

"A rock. I fell." she said, simply.

"There's more than that. Go on," Mike urged, sensing she was holding back.

"I was in the woods, looking for meat. Something came out of the bushes. I got scared and ran. I fell and hit my arm on the rock. I didn't see the blood until I got back to the basement. Things followed the smell, in the night. They clawed at the door."

"Did any get in?" Mike asked. He knew he was pushing hard and walking dangerously close to the line, not wanting to break her but hopeful he could help her see the event in a new light.

"No," El admitted, recalling the terror of those two nights until fresh rains washed away the trail of blood.

"Were you ready to fight them if they did?"

El nodded, a little more confidently, casting a glance at her spear, carefully propped in the corner.

"You were smart to run from danger, there's no shame in that. Falling because you tripped running through the dark woods isn't anything to be ashamed of either. Patching up your arm and fighting through the pain, getting ready to defend your shelter; El, all those things weren't weakness, those were all things you were strong enough to face down. Weakness would have been giving up, opening the door and letting the creatures in."

Seeing she needed more convincing, Mike pulled his right foot up and laid it across his knee. Rolling down the sock, he pointed out a patch of skin about the size of a golf ball where no hair grew, and his flesh had a rough, melted appearance.

"I have scars too, and even those are a sign of *your* strength. When I was building one of the first versions of the machine in my parents basement, I wired something up wrong and the high-voltage charge arced free of the field that was supposed to contain it. It hit my leg and knocked me across the room. It hurt like hell, but I knew I couldn't let it stop me. You were out there, waiting for me, and I had to keep pushing forward to reach out."

Turning over his left arm, Mike pointed to a scar running for several inches above his wrist, not unlike her own. She hadn't spotted the mark before, obscured by the hair that covered his arms.

"This one was from climbing out of the basement in the lab. It was the 9th Upside-Down I explored. I didn't get my rope tied right at the top, and halfway up, it came loose. I fell for about 10 feet, enough time to have my life flash before my eyes, and I saw the only thing in it that mattered - you. I reached out to the wall and tore up my arm on some old wires sticking out, but I held tight. I knew if I fell all the way down the elevator shaft, that would be the end. The thing is, I wasn't afraid of dying. I was afraid of never finding you; of leaving you to rot in another version of the Upside-Down. So in spite of the blood running down my arm and the pain that made me want to vomit my guts out, I clawed my way to the top of that shaft and back out to the Jeep. You pulled me through and gave me the strength to go on."

El stared in shock at Mike's admission and found herself starting to come around just a little. She didn't like the marks, and still found herself conflicted as to whether Mike would think less of her for them. As much as she looked down on her own, she found herself admiring the marks Mike was willing to show.

"How about this one?" he went on, indicating the lines on her side she had called ugly.

El's face dropped again, remembering that terrible day. "I was so hungry. The smoke creature had finally left but there was almost nothing around. The spiders killed something big, and I was trying to cut off pieces to take back. I heard something in the bushes, but I thought I had time to cut one more piece before I ran. It was one of the big ones, tough skin and claws, and it got me. I tried to run, but it didn't want to meat I had cut, it wanted me."

El started to shake, the memory playing out crystal clear in her mind, but Mike held firm to her hands. He let the memory run through her mind while he kept her grounded to the safety of her bedroom.

"What happened next?" he asked, urging her on and reminding her he was right there too.

"It went for my neck. I threw my power at it, but I was so weak, I couldn't hold it off. I hadn't eaten in two days, and I couldn't get a grip on it. It pulled two sharp claws against my side while I tried to throw it off. I finally got a knife back into my hand and sank the blade deep in its neck. It died on top of me, it's paw still stuck in my side."

"What did you do after that?" Mike asked, astonished at the encounter she had survived, and desperate for her to recognize her own strength in it as well.

"I knew I had to get back, but I was hungry, so I pulled the whole body back with me. I knew it was a mistake, the trail of blood leading right to my door, but I pulled it inside with me. I cleaned up my side and then cut up the beast and cooked it. It tasted good."

"See? It tried to attack you, and you turned it into dinner."

"But it got me, I wasn't fast enough." El countered.

"El, getting wounded in a fight isn't the same as losing the battle."

She looked back at him, still skeptical, and Mike knew there was one more scar he needed to show her. He'd been carefully avoiding it, knowing the guilt she would immediately try to weigh herself down with. Taking a deep breath, Mike grabbed the hem of his t-shirt and pulled it off over his head. El gasped as Mike's own wound came into view. Three wide scars began in the middle of his stomach and wrapped around almost to his back, while countless punctures circled wide around his shoulder. She didn't know which had done it, but she could think of several creatures in her version of the Upside-Down capable of leaving such wounds. All of them were fearsome, the predators she avoided at all cost.

"Mike," she gasped, reaching out a hand to gingerly trace the marks.

"It was in the 39th Upside-Down. I had just finished searching the school and was headed back to the Jeep. I was thinking about how I just knew it had to be the right world, and I'd find you in the basement in a few minutes. I wasn't paying attention, and this thing sprung out of the darkness at me. I let my guard down even though I

knew there was a ton of life in that world. It bit into my shoulder first and then sank its claws into my stomach. I tried to role free, but that only tore the lines over to my side as it hung on to its dinner. It pulled its arm back, ready to strike again when I finally wrestled the shotgun free, firing a shot at its chest and throwing it clear. I laid there for a long time, trying to press my shirt into the wound to stop the bleeding and I know I passed out at least once."

El was speechless, heartbroken at how close he had come to losing his life, cold and alone in the dark realm of the Upside-Down.

"I thought about you again, and I saw your face, and I knew I couldn't die there. You were out there somewhere waiting for me, and I had to keep going. I drug myself back to the Jeep, and I made the drive back to my lab. Every time the pain got bad and I felt like passing out, I thought about you and you gave me the strength to keep going. I made it back to the real world and called Will. He showed up with a doctor he'd gone to school with, someone he trusted to keep a secret. They stitched up my wounds, shot me full of antibiotics, and tried to make sure I wasn't going to die. I don't remember much of it, from all the painkillers they pumped into me, but Will told me as soon as the last of the stitches were in, I tried to get back into the Jeep to go back in. I hadn't searched the basement yet, and knew you could be there waiting."

"Mike, I'm so sorry," El said, eyes downcast, brimming with tears.

"Don't be, El. Every one of your scars is a time you were strong. Something - the Upside-Down, a monster, the universe - tried to tell you it was the end, and you refused to give up. They tried to make you feel weak, but you were strong enough to say 'no more' and keep going. Every time something tried to get in my way, and tell me it was time to stop, you were right there too, giving me the strength to keep going. Scars aren't ugly reminders of weakness. They are proud badges of honor and reminders of times you were strong enough for both of us."

El looked down, letting her eyes run across the marks that crossed her stomach and followed the patchwork of lines up her arms.

"Still pretty?" she asked, falling back on the reassuring touchstone

that had strengthened their early relationship.

"Still pretty," Mike agreed. "Always pretty."

They still had more marks to discuss, but she felt better about what they signified. Maybe she could deal with the physical marks better than she originally thought. Days got just a little easier, while nights remained a struggle.

Like so many nights, El woke up screaming again. Before he could reach over and snap on the light, Mike found himself flying through the air toward the wall. It was becoming routine, and he let himself go limp before he hit. Just before her arm came to his throat, Mike threw one arm up to catch the impact and keep his neck protected. Other than that, he didn't fight, didn't struggle, just spoke to her in a calm and soothing tone until he could bring her out of the fog.

"It's alright El. You're safe. You're home. It's me. It's Mike. You're safe. Come back to me."

Slowly she came around, the wild panic falling away from her eyes, leaving them a clear and sparkling brown again.

"There she is. All better." Mike soothed, putting his free arm around her. "I've got you."

El couldn't understand it, as they moved back toward the bed, how Mike could be so calm and accepting of her midnight assaults. She had nothing to really compare with for a normal relationship, but she knew theirs wasn't anything close. She knew Jen didn't fling Will across their bedroom in the middle of a nightmare, and if she did, even the normally calm and collected Will Byers would have concerns. Sometimes, she almost wished Mike wasn't so understanding; it left her feeling even worse that she was hurting him. He never made a big deal about it, never uttered a complaint, but she always watched with a guilty twinge in her stomach when he discreetly swallowed a few Advil with his coffee the next morning.

She tried closing her eyes and settling back in to sleep, but the vines and claws felt terribly close still.

"Mike?" she whispered, softly.

"Hmm?" he asked, sleep already begging to return.

"Will you sing me the song?"

Mike's eyes snapped open at the odd request. He was pretty sure he knew exactly what she was talking about, but wanted to make sure.

"The song?"

"The one you used to sing. At night. After the radio." she explained.

"You heard that too?" he asked, slightly embarrassed.

"Yes," she whispered sleepily, nodding her head in affirmation. "I heard, and it helped."

"Okay. Sure, I can sing it for you." he agreed warmly, settling her deeper in his arms.

It had been the end of 1986 when he had heard the song for the first time, and it had nearly destroyed him. In that quiet week between Christmas and New Year, while they were all out of school, Mike had taken Holly to the movies to see one she had been begging to go to for more than a month. It seemed like a harmless distraction to get his mind off his research for a few hours. He didn't think the story of a family of mice could conjure up thoughts of his own loss and he had been painfully wrong. His only saving grace was that Holly had been too wrapped up in the movie to notice her big brother slowly falling apart, tears streaming down his cheeks in the darkened theater.

The song had felt like it was written just for them and Mike would sing it to her in the night, not over the radio but hoping somehow she would hear him all the same. It wasn't a daily thing, but he would always sing it for El on nights when he was feeling at his most hopeless, knowing it would bring him back from the edge and hoping desperately it would do the same for her.

Laying nestled together, Mike gently stroked El's hair as she began to calm again. Softly, he whispered the lyrics that had become the hymn

of his search, adding in the subtle changes he had added to suit their situation.

Somewhere out there beneath the pale moonlight

Someone's thinking of you and loving you tonight

Somewhere out there someone's saying a prayer

That we'll find one another in that dream somewhere out there

And even though I know how very far apart we are

It helps to think we might be wishing on the same bright star

And when the night wind starts to sing a lonesome lullaby

It helps to think we're sleeping underneath the same big sky

Mike paused and swallowed hard, the familiar tears welling quickly in his eyes. He fought to remind himself the search was over. She was home. She was safe. They were together, finally.

Somewhere out there, if love can see us through

Then we'll be together

Somewhere out there

Out where dreams come true

21. Chapter 20

Summer drifted slowly on for Mike and El. Nights were hard, but they were learning to cope. Their minds started to run out of fresh horrors to invent, and started falling back on a few choice favorites. In a way, that made things easier; they put a name to each of the repeated dreams and could identify them upon waking. Broken leg. School hallway. Can't reach you. Never find you. The smoke gets in. It saved time as they talked, curled together in bed. They could skip the gruesome details, unless there was something new, and get right to the heart of the fears and memories the dream triggered.

Days, in general, grew smoother all the time. They still had days where they would spend the morning sitting on the couch, talking through the pains of the past. There were also plenty of days where life was perfectly normal. They would work together in the garden, or on other little tasks around the house. They took a drive out to a nearby lake and spent the whole day wandering lazily along the water's edge. They made trips together to the grocery store, trips that went far better than the day she stole the Eggos. No one stared, or threatened to call the police. People made eye contact, gave a smile, and went about their shopping.

A few times, El chose to remain at home while Mike went out to run a quick errand. He assured her she was always welcome to go with him, and most times she did, but she also knew she had to prove to herself she was still alright on her own as well. The first time was only twenty minutes, which she spent nervously on the couch just counting down the seconds. She practically tackled him with a hug when he came in the door, but the look of ecstatic pride on her face was unmistakable.

El also found herself taking over some of the duties in the kitchen, fixing their dinner most nights. Mike insisted it wasn't anything she had to do, but she reassured him she wanted too. In the Upside-Down, preparing food had been a kind of sanity check for her. When she was near starving, she would throw hunks of meat over the flame just long enough to render them safe then dove in, ripping pieces away with insatiable teeth. She knew she wasn't much better than

the creatures of the woods in those moments, so when the situation wasn't desperate, she took the time to be slow and methodical about the things she cooked. Salt, and a few of the strongest spices she could find, were some of the only things that survived into the Upside-Down, but she had carefully built up a catalog of ways to prepare the foulest of meats and vines into meals that still had a civilized feel. As long as she had the clarity of mind to care about the food she was preparing, she knew she was surviving.

Free of that world, and with access to recipes and proper tools, El found cooking to actually be fun. Fresh ingredients, picked up from the store, made the whole process easier. She didn't have to pull out a knife and fight other customers for a package of pork chops. Heads of lettuce didn't scream when she chopped them. By far, the best part was the satisfied look of pleasure and pride on Mike's face when he ate one of her meals. He had done so much for her, and it felt good to be able to do this for him. For the first time in his life, Mike realized he was going to have to be careful just how much he ate, or El was going to start fattening him up.

Fresh air, sunshine, proper food and a secure home were working wonders on El, and little by little, she found herself coming back to life. No longer breathing the foul, choking air of the Upside-Down, her voice was softening to where it always should have been. It was music to Mike's ears, particularly her laugh, and he found himself striving to make her laugh any time he could. She wasn't lost to the world, she was thriving in it.

It was late July when they hit another setback. The day started out like any other, lazing in bed and sharing a quiet breakfast. That afternoon, Mike had to go to campus for a staff meeting, to discuss changes in the department for the coming Fall quarter. He and El had started talking about the meeting a few days ahead, ensuring she was okay on her own for the afternoon. He was going to be gone for close to three hours, the longest they'd been apart in the month and a half she'd been home. He told her he could probably get out of the meeting if she was nervous about the length of time, but she reassured him it was fine. She knew once classes started again, he would be gone for long portions of each day, so it was good practice.

El waved from the front porch as Mike backed down the driveway

and headed down the street, before going back inside. The whole drive, Mike had a nagging feeling in the pit of his stomach that something was wrong, but he tried to brush it off as nerves. He didn't like being away from her, still afraid she would be gone when he returned. The second the meeting was done, Mike took off for his car, that weight in his stomach only growing as he headed home.

Pulling into the driveway, he knew immediately something was wrong. Halfway up the front walk, he spotted what looked like the red wristband that held El's key to the front door. Throwing the car into park, and shutting off the engine, he ran and picked up the key, desperately hoping it was anything else. Sure enough, it was the door key, something that hadn't been in her hands as she waved him off. A look up at the house only deepened his sense of dread. The door sat open a few inches, the doorknob bent and the deadbolt twisted so hard it had shattered the wood around it.

"El?" Mike shouted, charging through the door, heedless of any dangers that might be lurking inside.

"El!?" he called again, getting no reply.

He forced himself to stop in the front hall, listening for sounds over the heartbeat pounding in his ears. The house was deathly still, but finally he heard a small sound from upstairs. Taking the steps two at a time, Mike rushed to El's room and pushed open the door. She was there, she was alive, but she wasn't alright. El sat in the far corner of the room, knees pulled up to her chest, balled up as tight as she could get. Her spear was clutched tight in her fists, fingers nearly white as they gripped polished shaft.

"El? El, what happened?" Mike asked softly, moving toward her slowly, not wanting to trigger an attack while she was armed.

She slowly raised her head to look up at him, eyes red and cheeks raw with tears. A line of blood sat dried under her nose.

"I don't belong here," she said, sadly. "I don't know how anything works."

"El, that's not true, and you know it," he consoled. "Can you tell me

what happened?"

He knelt in front of her, holding her gaze. She opened her mouth to speak, and instead dissolved into tears again, falling forward into Mike's outstretched arms. It was an awkward embrace with the spear still held tight in her grasp, the rusty blade just inches from Mike's neck, but he wasn't about to try to take it from her. It was her security blanket, and if it made her feel better to hold it, that was fine with him. Slowly she came around again, and he began to coax the story out.

She had wanted to surprise him with a new recipe for dinner; in fact, she had been planning it ever since he told her about the meeting. After he left, she had gone inside to get ready. Reading over the recipe one more time, though she could recite it by heart at that point, she made a list of the things she would need. There were only five things they didn't already have and she got herself ready to walk to the store. It was her first time leaving the house all by herself but she was confident in the trip. She knew the way to the store and back, only a short 6 blocks each way; they had walked it together several times. She had her list of ingredients. She had her wallet. She remembered what Mike had told her about the different bills, and how they worked. She had watched him pay plenty of times when they went shopping. She could do this.

The walk to the store, and the trip through the aisles all went without a hitch. She found the items she needed and headed up to the checkout stand with her basket. She had been adding up the price tags as she shopped, and knew about how much she needed to find in her wallet. It would be close to \$30, so she knew she needed the \$20 bill, but she couldn't remember if she should use the second \$20, or some of the \$5s for the rest.

"Are these yellow onions, or sweet?" the cashier asked, pulling her focus away from the bills in her hand.

"Umm..I'm not sure," she stammered. She had just grabbed an onion from the produce section, not realizing there were different types.

After giving a dismissive huff, the checker picked up her intercom and called for a manager to assist. The loud, crackling voice on the

speakers overhead set her nerves on edge. Had she done something wrong? They never called someone over when Mike was shopping. She took a deep breath, trying to calm down; everything was fine, she reminded herself. The cashier continued scanning her other items.

"ID?" she asked, as El went back to figuring out the bills she would need.

She looked up again, puzzled, as the cashier held out a bottle. The recipe had called for red wine for the sauce, so she had picked out a bottle that wasn't too expensive.

"ID?" the cashier asked again, losing patience.

"I..I don't have one," El admitted. She remembered Mike explaining that they could get her one, when she was ready, but she didn't think she would need it for the store. They never asked Mike for ID when they went shopping together.

"I can't sell you alcohol without an ID," she explained.

"Oh, okay," El said slowly, starting to doubt whether this had been such a good idea.

She thought hard about what they had at home, that she could use instead, but she also knew she had to get her money ready. A line of customers was beginning to form at the register, waiting for the manager to come over and deal with her onions. She could feel their eyes on her, their impatience growing. The store suddenly felt hot. She spotted the manager coming over, looking angry to have been summoned from the cool confines of his office. Her heart was racing, her mind firing on everything that seemed to be going wrong all at once. The lights overhead started to flicker, and she knew that was her fault, too. She looked around again, feeling the frustrations around her like a cloud. The cashier and the manager were talking about her, the wine, the onion. She felt herself breathing hard. Suddenly the moment was cut by the sound of a firetruck passing in the street, its siren wailing, and something broke inside El.

Closing her fist tight around her wallet and abandoning the groceries,

she sprinted out the door, ignoring the confused stares watching her flee. Outside, she aimed herself toward home and ran as hard as she could. A second emergency vehicle - police this time - went racing past, the sirens piercing her tattered resolve. She crossed an intersection, not paying attention and was barely missed by a car crossing through. The driver leaned on the horn and yelled something after her, but she barely heard. The whole world disappeared around her and all she could focus on was getting home, safe behind closed doors. As she started up the driveway, she wrestled the key off her wrist, and then dropped it in her panic. Not slowing to pick it up, she reached out with her mind, intending to twist the lock but throwing far too much power behind it.

Not knowing what else to do, she ran to her room and huddled behind the relative safety of her spear. Still, the sounds of the world found their way in; another siren passing on the next street over, a lawnmower next door, dogs barking. All of them were safe noises, she knew that, but each one felt like an attack, something dangerous making its way into the house.

Mike listened to her story, holding her in his arms and rocking her gently. He cursed himself for leaving her behind to go to a pointless meeting. He cursed the cashier for being rude, and he cursed the world for being so unfair to El. She deserved the world more than anyone, and it had left her feeling like she didn't belong.

"Everything is too loud," she said sadly. "Too fast."

As if to prove a point, a neighbor from up the street drove past, radio blaring and bass cranked as high as it would go. The rhythmic thrumming rattled her window with each note and he could feel El tensing in his embrace. There needed to be some changes, things he hadn't considered of before. He needed to make it clear that the whole house was open to her, and if his room at the back of the house was quieter, she was welcome to it whenever she needed. He was about to remind her she could always call him, especially when something like this happened, but he realized it would have done no good. The department secretary had been in the meeting, and Mike hadn't even bothered going back to his office after, so she very well could have called and he'd never know. He had dismissed them so far, not really seeing the need, but resolved to buy a pair of

cellphones before the next time he had to leave her alone. She needed to be able to reach him wherever he was, from wherever she was.

Before all that, there was something else he needed to show her. He had avoided it so far, hoping beyond hope she never needed it, but now felt like the right time.

"Come on, there's something I want to show you. I think it might help, when things like this happen."

He stood, gently pulling her along with him. El slowly unfolded, her limbs stiff from sitting curled up for so long. She hesitated for a moment of consideration, then propped her spear back in the corner; she was feeling a little better, safer again now that Mike was home. As he led her downstairs and into the garage, Mike continued to console her.

"First, you need to understand, you absolutely belong in this world. You have just as much right to it as grouchy cashiers, grocery store managers frustrated with their own lives and impatient drivers in too much of a damn hurry. You're making amazing progress in the very short time you've been back. Don't forget, it wasn't that long ago you couldn't step beyond the driveway with me right by your side. Today, you walked by yourself to the grocery store so you could fix me a surprise dinner. Sure, some unexpected things came up and you had a panic attack, and that's okay. It is okay, to not be okay sometimes. You're dealing with hundreds of brand new things every day, and not all of them are going to go right the first time."

He stopped, turning to look her in the eyes. "El, you are far braver, and so much stronger, than you give yourself credit for. I don't know anyone else who could have survived the things you did, and who could adapt to this world the way you have, decades later than you rightly should have. This world is yours. And you belong in it."

He could see in her eyes, she was understanding what he was saying. The first hints of a smile were returning to the corners of her lips.

"But when there are times that this world feels too much; too loud, too fast, too overwhelming, I think I have something that can help."

They were standing in the garage, by a door that led out into the backyard. The garden had crossed her mind when she was first safely back in the house - she knew it was supposed to be her retreat when she needed someplace to go - but even there, the sounds of the world found their way in.

"Before I show you, I need to know that you trust me." Mike said, his voice serious with concern.

She gave him a puzzled look. Of course she trusted him; he was only person she knew would never hurt her. Taking a steadying hold of her left hand, Mike reached over with his free hand and hit a button on the wall beside the door. Moments later, a gateway appeared before them, its shimmering red surface set just inches in front of the door out of the garage. El took a step back, recognizing what it was and knowing the terrible things that lay on the other side. A panic started to run through her, knowing Mike would never make her go back there, unsure what he was trying to prove.

"I need to know that you trust me," Mike repeated, his eyes firmly on hers. "I need to know, that you know, that I would never take you somewhere dangerous or put you into a situation you couldn't handle. I need to hear you say it."

El looked from Mike's concerned face, to the portal hiding who knows what on the other side, and then back to Mike. She took a deep breath, and nodded.

"I trust you."

Mike smiled and took a step forward. El stepped up beside him. She closed her eyes, reminded herself it would all be okay, and together they stepped through the gateway.

The first thing El felt was an instant of cold as they passed through the opening, and then the radiant warmth of sunshine on her face. She slid her eyes open, still half expecting to find herself in Mike's backyard, or a dark and dead version of that space. What she saw instead took her breath away.

The sky was a crystal blue, dotted with a handful of puffy white

clouds. The lightest hint of a breeze rustled the leaves on tall, exotic trees. Other than the gentle chirping of distant birds, there wasn't another sound to be heard. She turned and reassured herself that Mike was by her side, and the portal stood shimmering behind them. She looked down at her feet, and realized they were standing at the head of a path, carefully cleared and lined with stones. Tracing the path with her eyes, she followed it down to the point where it split, and began to wind, branch and rejoin between beds of flowers and small shrubs, outlined in stones with the same care as the path. More colors than she even thought possible dazzled off her eyes as she stepped forward, as if in a trance. A few of the flowers she recognized from Mike's backyard, but most were brand new to her.

A small stream entered the garden at one end and followed a carefully established course past blooms of purple, blue and brilliant gold. Reds and pinks blended until they looked like the sunrise, blossoms of orange and yellow combined like fire. The water softly rippled onward over smooth stones, winding this way and that, crossing the well-tended space until it flowed away at the far end.

At the far side of the garden space stood a small, one-room structure with a wooden front porch. It was a simple building, canvas-sided but more than enough to keep out the elements. In front stood a reclined bench seat, room enough for two, positioned to look out across the colorful splendor of this paradise.

El followed the path in silence, Mike by her side, until they came to the very center of the garden. In a bed all its own, sat a rose bush in full bloom, its petals a beautiful, pale pink. Immediately she thought of the small dress, carefully packed away in her closet, that was once that very same color. She turned a slow circle, taking in the serene beauty all around, until her eyes fell back on Mike.

"You deserve our world. You have every right to it and it is the place you belong. But when it all gets to be too much, like today, this world is yours, too."

"Mike," she whispered in astonishment, otherwise speechless.

It had been a labor of love, and part of what kept him sane through recent years. Once he had the automatic rigs testing the countless,

possible worlds faster than he could ever hope too, much of his life had become a game of waiting. There were always little things to repair and improve, and results to catalog, but he was still left with swaths of time he had to fill. He had spent years spending his idle hours at the bottom of a bottle, emerging long enough to check on the results pouring of the computer and occasionally venturing into an Upside-Down to search. Even in the middle of the haze, though, he knew it couldn't go on like that forever. It had taken that final wake-up-call from Will to straighten himself out, but it had been the right decision and one he needed to make.

Will had told him to build El something beautiful, something to help her move forward from the horrors of where she had been, and he had started with his backyard. While he took pride in what he had put together, it quickly became clear there wasn't enough space to create what she truly deserved. He still tended it carefully through the years, knowing it would be a first step toward home, but he recognized his own world had horrors and pain she might need to retreat from as well.

He wrestled with the idea for a while on just where to build a more deserving retreat for her when he suddenly remembered a world from his early search. In a dark moment of desperation, and knowing it couldn't possibly be the answer, he had dialed in the address 011M-011K-011.0H; Eleven Eleven Eleven. When the portal had resolved in his basement and he determined there was solid ground on the other side, he had stepped through, fully expecting a dead world or something else equally disappointing. Instead, he had found a paradise; warm, mild and peaceful. He didn't know how it was possible such a perfect world could be reached by the name of an equally perfect girl, but he knew it meant there had to be some proper order to the universe. He visited often in those early days, in times when the dark thoughts in his mind wouldn't go away, feeling somehow closer to her in that place; in El's world.

The Hawkins portion of World Eleven, as he came to call it, was mostly forest; still beautiful but it would have been work to create a garden. The first time he entered the world from his home in Indianapolis, the universe rewarded him again with a place that was nearly perfect. The trees were more sparsely placed there, and the

area of his backyard and beyond was mostly a large meadow. It had only been necessary to remove two trees to begin turning the space into exactly the kind of retreat she deserved.

For seven years, he had toiled away his free hours, trying to make the space perfect for her. Some weekends, he would work from sunup until well after dark, only returning to his house long enough to make his nightly radio call. He had worked mostly by hand, the sweaty brow and aching muscles a reminder he was making progress, for her. A few power-tools had been necessary when putting together the cabin, a thought that still made him laugh. He was certain he broke nearly every law of physics the day he plugged an extension cord into the wall in his garage and then carried the end through the portal to run a saw on the other side. He had only given the idea a 10% chance of working, and a 3% chance of imploding the universe, but the saw had fired right up and he established a comfortable shelter for times she wanted to stay longer than an afternoon.

Jen had been there a few times, helping Mike carry heavier items to their final spots. Will had come once, swallowing his nerves and stepping through the portal to help Mike with several heavy pieces of lumber for the cabin. They had made it about halfway across the garden when Mike glanced back and saw the panic on Will's face, now drained of all color. They dropped the wood where they were, and Mike put an arm around Will's shoulder, guiding him back through to the safety of the garage. He had put his arms around Will and held him until his color returned and the shaking stopped, apologizing for putting him through that and promising he didn't have to go back through if he didn't want to.

Other than that, the garden had been a solo project. There was a peace to the work, the labor keeping his mind from venturing to the darker places he tried to avoid. While most of the plants were ones he had brought through from his own world, a few were specimens he had found nearby when he ventured further to reassure himself this world was free of dangers. The trees were filled with birds, and the nearby lake was teeming with fish and other exotic marine life, but he had found nothing in this world that posed a danger for the two of them.

"If you ever need to get away from the world, for an hour or a day,

this place is here for you."

Taking her by the hand, Mike led El over to the cabin for the grand tour, simple though it was. The single room was cozy, but more than enough space for its purpose. A bed sat against the back wall, a single sheet thrown over top to keep the dust away while the space was unoccupied and linens folded neatly in a nearby trunk. A table with two chairs sat near a window at the front. A counter with cabinets, stocked with a supply of food for a few simple meals, rounded out the residence. Two oil lamps and several candles sat at the ready to provide light during the dark. While the place would be inadequate to live in permanently, El thought it was perfect for times she needed to get away, either from dangers of the real world or from the dangers in her own mind. She knew she couldn't let this place become a crutch, to escape every time things got hard, but just knowing it was here waiting made her feel better.

The complications of the afternoon forgotten for now, El had an endless stream of questions for Mike. How he had built all of this, what the different flowers were, how to open and close the gateway for herself. One by one he answered her questions as they strolled the paths, stopping for her to inspect this flower and that one. They paused where the stream left the garden and Mike pointed into the distance, where its meandering course met up with a lake where he offered to take her swimming sometime, if she wanted. He often took a quick dip there to cool off after a hot afternoon's work.

Following the path back around to the cabin, the pair settled in the bench seat on the porch and looked out over the garden. El's eyes continued to dazzle at the multitude of color and her heart overflowed at the realization of how much time, effort and care had gone into its creation. Mike had been apprehensive in coming here, having neglected the place for over a month. Since work had begun, he rarely left for more than a few days at a time, but the place had survived just fine without him. He found himself looked back and forth, between El and the garden, and realizing their similarity. Perfection doesn't require his constant touch, only a place to lay roots and thrive.

El caught his gaze and leaned in, planting a soft kiss to his lips. "Thank you. For all of this." Laying her head on his shoulder, she

added, "Can we stay for a while?"

Mike wrapped an arm around her shoulder and pulled her in close,
"We can stay as long as you want."

22. Chapter 21

They sat curled together on the porch, gazing out over the flowers until long after the pink sunset had faded from the sky and they could no longer make out the blooms. There were no lights in this world, aside from the faint red glow of the portal across the garden. Trillions of stars dotted the night sky here, some constellations familiar, many brand new to Mike's eyes. For all his time spent in World Eleven, he'd never really taken the time to slow down and soak in all the serene beauty it had to offer. There had always been things to do, weeds to pull, something to plant, and then back home to make his call reaching out to El. Even now, sitting still left him feeling ill-at-ease, as though there were something he was forgetting to do. Almost as if she could feel the tension rising in his mind, El snuggled closer to his side and all his worries fell away once more.

They thought about staying the night in the cabin, but decided they would save that for another time. Mike couldn't help but notice, throughout the afternoon, how El would periodically glance back at the portal to reassure herself it was still there, not yet fully trusting the world even if was an unconscious reaction. After the traumatic day, he felt a good night's sleep in a familiar place was probably best. They opted for Mike's bed that night, putting just a little more distance between her and the noises out in the world. While a nightmare still found its way into her mind, it was merely a replay of her experience at the store with nothing added or enhanced. As she described it to Mike, she actually found herself laughing at how perfectly ordinary and mundane the dream had been. No monsters, nothing trying to kill her, just unfamiliar situations and a grumpy cashier. For once, she had no problem settling right back into a blissful sleep, after a few reassuring kisses from Mike.

El gave it a couple days, and then informed Mike she wanted to try the store again. They had talked through the issues she encountered and she knew how to handle them this time. She would pay close attention to the type of onion she picked out, and Mike had explained how wine was something only adults can buy. While she was definitely old enough, lots of stores were still picky about getting ID from everyone in case they were being tested by state inspectors.

While she was still nervous about the experience, she knew it was important to dive back in and not retreat from things that didn't go right on the first try. As a compromise they walked together to the store, since El had managed that part just fine before, and then went separate ways once they got there, planning to meet back up out front.

Just knowing he was nearby left El feeling worlds better as she proceeded down the aisles with her new shopping list. To avoid the ID issue, Mike picked out a bottle of wine this time so she wouldn't have to alter the recipe. On a whim, he added a bottle of root beer and a carton of vanilla ice cream to his basket, planning a special desert treat for El.

Unplanned, Mike ended up at the register right behind El, though she didn't notice as he put his basket down, placing the little divider stick between their items. He decided not to call attention to himself, as the whole point of the trip was to rebuild her confidence in venturing out on her own. El's apprehension grew as the customer ahead of her left and she stepped forward. As though the universe was determined to test her even more, it was the same cashier as the other day. Despite the same items, minus the wine, the girl gave no sign of even recognizing El and the whole transaction went without a hitch. El took her change with a smile, gathered her bag and headed out the door with a spring in her step. Mike could only stare with a proud smile as she left; she had done it all on her own, never even realizing he was by her side.

"Sir? ID?" the cashier asked, interrupting his train of thought.

"Sorry," he apologized as he reached for his wallet, blushing slightly when he realized that, from the cashier's perspective, he was simply a creep staring at the beautiful woman walking out the door.

That night, El was practically bubbling with pride as she fixed dinner and it turned out to be one of her best. Despite his offers of help, Mike was forced to sit back and watch as she moved expertly around the kitchen. Sauces were stirred, meats were browned, El was happy, and Mike took it all in, determined to capture the moment in his mind.

Their meal was delicious, and though his desert wasn't nearly as fancy, El declared it perfect. While she had refused his help with the cooking, she was more than happy to let Mike assist when it came to the cleaning up the kitchen afterwards, something he was all too happy to do.

"Can we save the rest of this?" El asked while Mike's back was to her, giving the last pot in the sink a final rinse.

Turning to look, he saw she was holding up the bottle of Merlot, still more than half full. For a brief moment, that familiar urge for a drink rose up and Mike contemplated grabbing a glass. There was a time he would have thought nothing of drinking the entire bottle in one sitting, often not even bothering with a glass. While it was never his drink of choice, he wouldn't pass it over when it was all he had in the house.

Forcing the memories back down, he quickly said "If we put the cork back in, it will stay good in the fridge for a while. Maybe you can find another recipe that needs it."

El watched Mike with a look of concern, the struggle impossible to hide on his face.

"Mike? What is it?" she asked.

"Sorry," he said, trying to brush it off. "Just a bad memory."

Setting down the bottle and stepping over to him she said, "Friends don't lie, Mike. You're pale. And you're shaking. What wrong?"

"Bad memories," Mike repeated, this time a guilty admission rather than a dismissal.

Taking hold of his hand, she led him over to sit at the table.

"Tell me," she said, gently.

So far, when they had talked, Mike had managed to gloss over just what was in the bottles she had seen him drinking when she would pay him a visit in the lab, or at home; occasionally in his office at work. Even when they discussed the cashier needing ID to sell her the

bottle of wine, El had accepted his answer that it was something only adults could buy, with no further questions about why. He knew he couldn't hide the truth of it forever, but he was ashamed at his weakness and all the time he had spent trying to drown out the world.

With a heavy sigh, Mike laid it all out for her as they sat at the kitchen table. He started at the beginning, explaining what alcohol was and the effects it had on a person, both the wonderful and the terrible. The bliss of numbing forgetfulness and the inevitable pain when it all came back. His start, stealing the occasional beer from his dad and later, the endless supply from Chief Hopper. He would drink to ease then pain of missing her and the guilt of not being able to reach her, only to then feel guilty for trying to escape. That guilt, he would try to drink away as well. He admitted to his darkest week, when he fell into bed with a bottle and only emerged long enough to find another when one would run dry. That absence from work had nearly cost him his job, and he managed to pull things back together for a time before slipping into old habits again. He described for her the night that Will finally talked sense into him, probably saving both Mike's life and El's in that moment. Only at the end was he able to explain with the slightest smile how Will had brought over his last bottle, the day Jen was cutting El's hair, and how he had confidently poured the last of it down the sink.

"I don't want to be numb, or to forget anything, ever again." Mike confessed, "After doing it for so long, I guess the old craving still flares up from time to time."

Mike looked up, trying to gauge her reaction to his outpouring. Retelling the story, the old guilt had returned, hating himself for trying to escape the pain when he knew she couldn't. For her part, El felt nothing but heartbreak for all he had put himself through, the sympathy etched on her face. She didn't blame him at all for wanting to escape, even for a little while. The way he described it, she probably would have tried it too if she found a drinkable bottle in the Upside-Down. Instead, she had eased the pain in her own way, which she still told herself had been selfish too, reaching out to find him in the Void, taking comfort in the mere ghost of his presence, when he couldn't do the same. They had done what they needed to do, both

the good and the bad, to survive and find their way back to each other. They had shattered themselves to pieces in the process, but little by little, they were putting each other back together.

"Do you want to try some?" Mike offered, explaining that Will and Jen both enjoyed wine, and that was it alright for people who can keep the habit in proper moderation. He wanted to make it clear there was nothing wrong with alcohol itself, only his own relationship with it.

After considering for a moment, El gave a small nod, curious about the drink that had consumed Mike. Grabbing a glass from the dish-drainer, Mike poured a small amount from the bottle and brought it back to the table. El gave the dark liquid a close inspection, sniffing it carefully then took a sip. It had a dry, fruity taste that left a tingly burn on her tongue. Swallowing, she could feel a warmth spreading down her throat. It wasn't great, but it wasn't terrible, either. She knew it probably took a lot more for that numbing relief Mike had described, but she got a sense of it from that single sip. She looked up Mike, who was watching her for a reaction.

Standing from the table, El walked over to the sink and dumped the rest of her glass. Grabbing the bottle from the counter, she overturned that in the sink as well, washing it down the drain just as Mike had described doing with his last bottle of whiskey. They had each other now, they didn't need the wine in their lives, and it was an ingredient in cooking she could easily avoid.

She returned to the table, taking Mike by the hands and pulling him to his feet. She wrapped her arms around him, pulling him close and whispered, "I don't want to forget, either."

Their eyes met and they knew another piece of the lives together had fallen into place.

Over the next few weeks, they worked to set El up with educational software, recommended by a friend of Jen's who taught at a nearby elementary school. Of course, the cover story had been that it was all for a young child who was to be home-schooled. Mike figured secondary subjects like science and history could wait until later, but reading, writing and math skills would help immensely in her move

out into the world. The problem was, they really had no idea just where they would need to start. In the lab, she had learned her letters and numbers, whatever Brenner thought would be necessary in his plans for her. She had a grasp on the very basics of reading, from those rare times when her Papa felt she had been good and earned books to keep in her room for a while, and that ability was aided by a fantastic memory. While she often had to ask Mike about a new word, particularly once she started going through his disused collection of cookbooks, it was rare she ever asked him about the same word a second time. Math, too, came to her in fits and starts. While she'd never been formally taught times tables, or long-division, she had figured out the skills for herself and put them to the test countless times.

If El needs two pieces of meat a day to live, and she has seven pieces, how long before she has to leave the safety of the basement and scavenge the spider's leftovers so she won't starve to death?

While the original intention had been for El work through lessons while Mike was on campus teaching during the day, she was eager to dive right in, once he showed her how to start up the programs and work the computer. She passed quickly through the early grades, as they thought she would, making her way up through fifth-grade materials in just a few weeks, before finally slowing to a more moderate pace. Math and logic skills came far easier to her than language, but even there, she progressed rapidly. Reading, it turned out, quickly became a new love for her. Perhaps it was the new ideas and exciting places books brought into her world, or maybe it was simply an act of defiance against her Papa, no longer able to use them as a reward or punishment against her.

Mike's own bookshelves being mostly composed of science and engineering texts, so it was an easy decision to take El downtown to get a library card of her very own. She tucked it carefully in her wallet, guarding it like some sacred artifact, one more step out into the real world. She was soon pouring through books, sometimes picking at random, other times asking Mike for recommendations he remembered enjoying as a child. Her enthusiasm managed to reawaken Mike's own love of reading, long set aside for more important matters. Growing up, he would often spend an afternoon

switching back and forth between reading and working on his next campaign, to the point that Dustin would occasionally call him out for unknowing slipping a novel's plot into their D&D story.

It wasn't long before evenings were spent curled together on the couch, each lost in books of their own. As it turned out, one of El's favorites actually came from Mike's own shelves. When time had been growing short for Chief Hopper, Mike had helped him start cleaning out his house, sorting through a lifetime of memories. One of the few items he absolutely refused to part with was an old, dog-eared copy of *Anne of Green Gables*. It was clear from the look he gave Mike, Hopper wasn't willing to talk about just why it was so important, but after he passed Mike had hung onto it for him, always giving it a prominent place on his own bookshelf. While she would switch back and forth between other books, El always found herself coming back to the old paperback, a well-worn, snapped blue hair-tie tucked between the pages where Hopper had left it as a bookmark.

Summer drew onward into its later days, the Upside-Down drifting ever further from El's thoughts. Instead, she found herself falling ever deeper into the world she had always been denied, bringing with it both relief as well as fresh worries. One Saturday in early September, the situation arose for another conversation Mike had been unconsciously putting off. The Fall quarter at school would be starting soon and he would be gone for the bulk of the day. While they were both slightly nervous about the extended time apart, El had plenty to keep herself occupied during that time, between the lessons on the computer and the endless supply of books from the library she continued to pour through. She had also recently succumbed to the allure of television and had a mid-day soap opera that had pulled her in. Neither were particularly worried about her getting bored during the day, and if any kind of emergency arose, they had their cellphones now, so she could reach him wherever they were.

All the same, Mike couldn't help but notice El beginning to withdraw and grow quieter as the first day of classes approached. He would ask her regularly if she was alright, and she would reassure him with a confidant smile that she was. In truth, he had to admit she didn't seem sad, only contemplative. He knew if things got serious, he

might have to press for a deeper explanation, but for the moment, he let her try to work out the thoughts on her own.

They were sitting at the kitchen table working on a jigsaw puzzle, one of El's newly discovered interests. The pictures were always pretty, but she also found herself drawn to the logical order of their construction and the process of assembling them. Each piece had a unique shape and a specific place where they fit, contributing to the overall picture. They quickly found she had a keen eye for spotting just the right piece among the hundreds of similar shapes and affixing it in its assigned place.

"Where do I fit?" El asked calmly, breaking the silence of the kitchen.

Mike looked up from the pile of pieces he was sorting through and saw her holding a single piece, turning it this way and that, contemplating its edges.

"What do you mean?" he asked, realizing she wasn't talking about the puzzle.

"You teach and you build. Will helps people. Jen keeps track of the money in her office." El explained. "Where do I fit?"

"You're wondering what you're supposed to do with your life?" Mike asked, reaching out and taking hold of her hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze.

El nodded, setting down the puzzle piece and looking at Mike.

"I don't know," Mike admitted with a small smile. "But that's okay to not know yet. I'll admit, I keep coming back to the same explanation, but this is another one of those roads that you've started down much later than everyone else. Most people spend their entire childhoods thinking about what they want to be when they grow up, trying new things, changing their mind lots of times along the way. Growing up, Will wanted to write and illustrate comics. It was only after his brush with the Upside-Down, and the healing process afterward, that he shifted psychiatry. Jen always planned on being a fashion designer until she started hanging out with us nerds in high school and finally admitted to herself she had a strong head for numbers. I changed my

mind a lot growing up, picturing myself doing quite a few different jobs; some of them I still think about. And that's the other thing, there's plenty of people who start one job and find it's not what they want to do after all, and change to something completely different. Some people change directions quite a few times before they settle on a path."

El met his eyes again, a slight upturn at the edges of her mouth. It was hard, always feeling like she was miles behind everyone else in some kind of race, but Mike's reassurances helped her feel just a little better.

"So how do I pick?" El asked. "I don't even know what's out there."

"By trying new things and gathering new experiences. You've already found you really like cooking; maybe it's something you would want to do as a job, or maybe just to keep as a hobby. The floral sketches you did in the garden last week with that pastel set from Will are gorgeous; maybe art is something you want to look more into. Or maybe, your calling is something neither of us have even considered or heard of. You can try lots of things and then choose from there."

"If you try lots of things," Mike went on, "and you decide none of them feel right, I think you've also earned the right to do nothing. You've already been working and fighting for your entire life, and you more than deserve a rest. That's something you get to choose for yourself."

El gave him a puzzled look, as 'nothing' wasn't an option she had even thought about. She could see the wheels turning in Mike's head as he struggled with something else he needed to say.

"If there's only one thing I can do for you, now that you're home, it's to make sure you always have a choice. Growing up in the lab, you never had a choice but to do what Brenner commanded. In the Upside-Down, you had no choice but to fight and survive. From now on, whatever else happens, I'll see to it that you always have a choice."

El was touched beyond words at the sentiment, but she didn't respond, seeing there was more he was struggling with. Mike

swallowed hard, willing himself to go on. It wasn't an idea he even wanted to breath life into, but it was the right thing to do.

Looking down, unable to meet her eyes, he went on. "El, you have a choice with me, too. This is your home, and whatever choices you make in life, you will always have a place here; you never have to worry about that. If you want to spend your life here with me, I will be happy the rest of my days. But you don't owe me anything. I don't ever want you to feel trapped here, feeling like you have to stay out of any kind of obligation. If you want to go out into the world and meet other people and live a life of your own, that's your choice. If you feel the desire to share that life with someone else and build a future with them, that's a choice you have, too. Your life is your's, to take in whatever direction makes you the most happy, because you deserve all the happiness the world can give you. If you step out into the world, and it isn't what you hoped, and you want to come back, you will always have a place here with me. The point is, you get to choose for yourself."

Mike glanced up slowly, terrified she would take his words as some kind of rejection rather than the assurance of freedom he intended. He knew he would be devastated if she left, but he would be no better than Brenner if he kept her believing she had no choice but to stay. When his eyes finally found El's face, he found the reassurance of a smile, growing wider with each passing second.

El couldn't picture ever wanting to leave, or to spend her life with anyone else. This house, and Mike's warm embrace, was home. She wanted to stay, not out of an obligation to repay all he had done for her, but the desire to be with someone who had shown through his actions just how much he cared for her. The offer was there, and she would give it the respectful consideration such an important decision deserved, but she couldn't imagine ever wanting to be anywhere else, with anyone else.

Before Mike knew what was happening, El left her seat and dropped into his lap, practically tackling him out of his chair as she threw her arms around him. Her lips found their way to his, a new passion she didn't fully understand driving her actions. Mike could feel in her embrace, with infinite relief, that she wasn't going anywhere, her mind holding no desire to leave. He had given her the world, and the

freedom to choose what she would do with it, and another piece of their lives fell into place.

23. Chapter 22

Fall quarter began, and Mike and El fell into a comfortable routine. The time apart during the day made their evenings that much sweeter, and El was nearly always at the door to greet him the moment Mike walked through. She was always eager to hear about his day, finding the little anecdotes from his department at the university to be almost as entertaining as her soap opera. El always had at least one new thing she had learned that day, which she excitedly shared as they got ready for dinner.

Most nights, El had something simmering on the stove, or tucked away in the oven, ready to finish when Mike got home. Two nights a week, though, El shared what she had come to regard as *her* kitchen and let Mike help. She was still certain, with enough practice, she could make a decent cook out of him. Those nights always left the kitchen a mess, and the process took far longer than if she had just done it herself, but she wouldn't trade them for anything. They usually wound up in fits of laughter at some point, and the look of pride on Mike's face when a meal came out right warmed her very soul.

October brought an unexpected change for El; another step on her road to recovery. Months of good food, clean air and sunshine had been working their healing effects on her, and she continued to feel more rejuvenated with each passing day. As she stood at the mirror, brushing out her hair after a shower one morning, she noticed something was different. Leaning in close, she realized the half inch next to her scalp was suddenly coming in a rich, dark brown. She excitedly called Mike over, eager to point out this latest development. She had grown used to the silvery shade of her hair and didn't mind it, but the idea that one more reminder of her past was fading away couldn't help but bring a smile to both their faces. Jen was already coming by a few days later to give El's hair another trim - she wasn't ready to trust her hair to anyone else yet - and this time El readily agreed to let her dye it as well, now that they knew the right color, and understanding it would look unusual if she let the color grow out slowly over the next year or two.

They opted to spend Halloween night at the cabin in the garden, El just a little nervous about the idea of dozens of costumed children ringing the doorbell all evening. Mike had explained the holiday and all that went with it after a trip to the store in late September when the racks of costumes showed up. She thought the idea of trick-or-treating sounded fun for the neighborhood kids, wistfully aware of yet another childhood experience she had been denied, but decided the whole night would probably also be full of triggers she wasn't ready to face. There was one aspect of the holiday El adored, and that was the candy. Mike had surprised her with a mixed bag of the treats after a picnic dinner in the garden. El sampled each one and declared the peanut-butter cups her absolute favorite. As little ghosts and pirates made their way up and down the street in front of their house, Mike and El sat curled together, a universe away, in front of a crackling fire in the pit they had built together outside the cabin.

November rolled in with dropping temperatures and bitter reminders. They talked in passing about the approaching anniversary of the day she went away, but they did their best not to dwell on it. They honored the day with a quiet dinner out, but kept the conversation on far happier topics. El was excited about the two holidays that were fast approaching, and she quizzed Mike about the meaning and traditions around both. Thanksgiving sounded fun, sharing a special meal with family and friends, but she found herself far more excited about Christmas. Even though it was only a single day, she had already realized the celebrations stretched over the weeks proceeding it, commercials and decorations already appearing more than a month ahead.

Thanksgiving dinner was spent with the Byers, just the four of them. While Jen and Will normally alternated years between visiting his parents in Maine, and hers down in Arizona, Jen hadn't been feeling well the past few weeks and wasn't really up to a long trip in either direction. Mike quietly confirmed with Will that they weren't sticking around on their account, and he assured Mike that wasn't the case. Jen had graciously accepted El's help in fixing dinner and the two spent the day side by side in the kitchen, laughing as they worked like friends who'd known each other for years. El couldn't help but notice just how happy Jen seemed, despite feeling under the weather for a while. Occasionally, Mike or Will would slip into the kitchen,

checking on progress and trying to sneak a taste, until El put her foot down and declared she was throwing out the next person who snuck in. The threat took on a whole new meaning with her, neither man wanting to put it to the test, well aware how far she could probably hurl them. Dinner was delicious and El couldn't remember feeling so wonderfully full. The evening left her with that pleasant sense of normalcy and belonging that let her know she was stepping ever further from the Upside-Down.

The next two weeks flew quickly by as Mike finished out the Fall quarter of his classes, anxious to start the nearly month-long holiday break. He knew there were plenty of experiences El had been denied, growing up in the lab and the Upside-Down, but for some reason it saddened him the most that she had missed out on Christmas. It was one of those annual milestones growing up that let you believe for just a little while that there was still some kind of magic in the world, and he was determined to make sure El had an amazing first Christmas. Admittedly, he probably went a little overboard when it came to decorating, making a second trip back to the hardware store when he decided the house needed even more lights. His power bill would be horrendous, but that was a problem for January, and the look of wonderment on El's face, the colored bulbs sparkling off her eyes, made it worth every cent.

They went out one crisp Saturday morning to buy a tree. El gave him a skeptical look as he explained that they would be cutting it down and setting it up in the living room with decorations, but she knew he hadn't led her astray so far. Their first stop before the tree farm, was at the store for ornaments and other decorations, the first thing they really got to pick out together for their home. Having never bothered to decorate his house for Christmas, inside or out, they wound up buying more than they really needed, but they were so caught up in the moment it didn't matter. The vibrant evergreen, decked out in blue and silver, brought a fresh warmth to the house.

They had a small setback one week before Christmas, when the first snowfall of the season came. Mike hadn't thought much of it when the weather forecast called for an overnight flurry, but he was jolted awake in the darkness when El let out a sharp cry and he found her stumbling backward away from her window. Jumping quickly out of

bed, he gathered her in his arms before looking to see what had startled her so badly.

"Shit," he quietly swore.

In the darkness outside, illuminated dimly by the lights up and down the street, fat, white snowflakes were drifting lazily by. He knew it was only snow, but he could see it through her eyes and it looked uncomfortably like the flaky spores of the Upside-Down.

"It's okay," he calmly soothed. "I know. I see what it looks like. It's only snow."

As the pounding in her chest slowed, El looked cautiously back at the window and then they stepped closer, his arms still around her. Focusing her eyes beyond the flakes, she could see the street was exactly as it should be, and she was still safely where she belonged. Her mind remained ill-at-ease as she watched the puffs of white drift down from above. She knew all about snow, having dealt with that in the Upside-Down as well. While it scrubbed some of the rot from the air, snow also meant bitter cold, even worse than usual. Snow meant prey going in to hiding, food going scarce, and life all around getting that much harder.

Mike could see the apprehension still painted on her face, and decided there was something he could do to help put her mind at ease. Knowing they would have to deal with cold winter weather at some point, they had gone out a few weeks prior and he had helped El pick out everything she would need. Crossing to the closet, Mike pulled out her new heavy coat, snow pants and boots.

"Let's go for a walk," Mike offered.

Skeptical but trusting, El pulled on the winter garments while Mike crossed the hall, returning minutes later decked out in his own heavy coat and boots. Down in the front hall, they added gloves and hats, a pink knit cap for El and the Stetson for Mike. She looked him over, and for a moment, couldn't help but think "handsome" with a smile. Still a little unsure about venturing out into the cold, El kept close by Mike's side as they stepped out the front door and into the quiet still of the front yard.

"I know what this all looks like," Mike repeated, "but I promise, there's nothing to be scared of with the snow here."

El took a deep, calming breath and nodded. Slowing turning to inspect the street before her and the house behind, she began to relax and knew Mike was right. She wasn't searching for food. If the snow continued for days, she wouldn't have to hold that painful debate in her head: to open a can of SPAM or wait it out another day. Nothing was going to come scratching at their door in search of shelter and warmth. Closing her eyes and listening hard, El realized the falling snow was even muffling out the usual noises. Normally, even on a quiet night, there was the low hum of tires on the highway a few miles away, or the distant cry of a siren closer to downtown. As they walked down the street, arm in arm, the only sounds El could hear were the soft crunch of snow under their boots and the gentle beating of her own heart, and she decided maybe snow wasn't so bad after all.

A few days before Christmas, they invited Will and Jennifer over for dinner and to exchange presents before they flew out to Maine. It was a simpler affair than Thanksgiving, and this time it was El's turn to take the lead on the menu, but it all turned out just as delicious. After desert, over coffee and cocoa, Will and Jen exchanged a look El couldn't help but spot.

"We have some news," Will began, taking hold of Jen's hand. "We've known for a little bit, but we were waiting until Christmas to tell everyone."

"I'm pregnant," Jen jumped in, the smile quickly spreading across her face.

The room was silent for a moment, before erupting in a series of hugs and congratulations. From her conversations with Jen, El understood what it meant, and was ecstatic for their friends. Mike had been concerned when Will had told him Jen hadn't been feeling well, but he knew they would have said something if it was serious. Now, of course, it all made sense. He knew they had always talked about having kids, it just hadn't happened yet, and it wasn't something he and Will had discussed. Guiltily, he realized it was probably because the majority of their conversations over recent years had revolved

around the search and bringing El home. She was home now, and Mike resolved to start being there more for his friend again, as Will had been for him.

Before they knew it, Christmas Eve had arrived. They spent the evening bundled together on the couch with hot cocoa, watching all the classic Christmas specials Mike had loved growing up. El couldn't help but feel a kinship with Rudolf, the reindeer who was an outcast for being different and who's special power ultimately saved the day. As a joke, wanting to carry on one more childhood tradition, they left out cookies and milk for Santa. Mike had explained the stories to her, both the one parents tell and the truth behind it, but she thought it was cute all the same.

The next morning, gathering at the tree, El was shocked to find the milk half drunk and the cookies gone. An extra present sat prominently under the tree labeled "To El, From Santa." She had no idea how Mike managed to slip out in the night to place it, without waking her up and getting thrown into the wall again, and when she asked, all he would say was that Santa must have come after all.

He had thought long and hard about what 'Santa' should get for her, almost embarrassingly so. He wanted something the screamed childhood, but nothing insultingly childish. Board games targeted at kids would be too simple, harder games didn't really fit what he intended. He thought about a doll, but that didn't feel quite right either. He felt horribly out of place wandering the aisles of a toy store, certain he'd never find what he was looking for, and was about to give up when he turned a corner and spotted it.

El slipped the bright holiday paper off the box, giddy with anticipation. She took a deep breath and lifted the lid, her eyes falling on the stuffed bear within. Deep brown eyes stared out of the softest fur she had ever felt and it had a velvety red ribbon tied in a little bow around its neck. Picking it up, she held it to her chest, awash with a warmth she couldn't explain but which filled her completely. Reaching out with one arm, she pulled Mike into the embrace, her heart overflowing. He could deny it all he wanted, but El knew nobody but Mike could pick something as perfect for her.

Not wanting to end the moment, but eager to give Mike the things

she had picked out as well, El carefully set the bear by her side. One by one, they passed each other the rest of the gifts, watching with excitement as the other unwrapped each treasure. Again, Mike worried he had gone overboard and bought too much, but he hadn't been able to help himself. El, too, had picked out more gifts than were probably necessary, unable to narrow down her choices the day Jen had taken her shopping. Jen had offered her a hand, but El had insisted on wrapping them all herself, and Mike could actually pick out the order she had worked through them, her skill rapidly increasing with each package.

Among the gifts for Mike were a burgundy sweater she thought would look just right on him, and a glass chess set. Mike had told her once that he had always wanted to learn the game, but just had never found the time.

"Now we can learn it together," she explained with a smile.

El adored the heart-shaped pendant necklace that Mike picked for her, asking him to put it on her right then while they sat by the tree, piles of discarded wrapping paper still surrounding them. As they came to the end, Mike reached behind the tree and pulled out one more small, carefully wrapped box El hadn't noticed before.

"Before you open this one," Mike began, "I hope you like it, but I want to apologize in advance if I overstepped a boundary with it."

Puzzled, El pulled carefully at the paper, revealing a plain, white box. Opening it, she was more confused by the device inside. Holding it gently in one hand, she inspected the thing, an assembly of tiny gears and springs. The only thing that looked familiar, hinting at its purpose, was the silver key affixed to one side. Supporting the frame delicately, she turned the key several times and let go, her eyes suddenly brimming with tears as the familiar melody began to unwind.

"Is this?" she began, unable to finish the question.

"Yeah," Mike smiled, pleased by the reaction, knowing he had done the right thing. "Go get it, and I'll put it back together."

El set the clockwork piece down gently and raced up the stairs, coming back moments later with the old music box in her hands. She had explained to him how much the box had meant to her, the calming melody a point of beauty in the terrible world where she was stuck, and how much it had hurt when the music would no longer play. He had found he could slip the works out of the box without her noticing, and had spent free moments over the last few weeks disassembling the delicate piece, cleaning up the gears and clearing the corrosion away from the comb. Positioning the works back in the box and reattaching the dancer, Mike passed the completed music box back to El, who gave the key another few turns. The dancer twirled as the melody unwound and El found herself back in Nancy's room, still right-side-up and full of apprehensive hope, the day she had explored the house while Mike was at school.

"Thank you," she whispered, setting the box down and throwing her arms around Mike, her lips finding their way to his.

"You're welcome, El" he smiled. "Merry Christmas."

They sat for a long time in each others arms, just listening to the soft tinkling melody, but eventually it was time to clean up and get ready to go. Christmas morning had been for just the two of them, but after breakfast, El's nerves started to settle in. They had been putting it off, but today was the day they were going back to Hawkins. The reason, of course, was to spend Christmas afternoon with Mike's family, to introduce them to his girlfriend Jane. The other reason, and one that gave her almost as many nerves, was a handful of reunions long overdue. Nancy and Jonathan were in town, along with their son Eric, and would be there for Christmas dinner. Tomorrow they were meeting up with Dustin, and with Lucas, who had flown out with his wife Max, to spend the holidays with his parents. The one leaving her the most unsettled, perhaps, was Mike's offer to drive her out to the long abandoned lab to prove to herself the place was truly gone. She hadn't decided yet if she could face that one and Mike had reassured her, more than once, that they didn't have to go if she wasn't ready.

They had become well practiced at getting her name right when they were around other people, but both were still nervous about slipping up. Out in the world, she embraced her identity as Jane, the name her mother had always intended. She was only El in private, among

those who knew her best, those who knew all she had been through. As they drove through town, past points she recognized from her many excursions in search for food, she fidgeted nervously with the bracelets on her left wrist, obscuring the the 011 tattooed there. The old black ink had faded a little over the years, but it was still distinctive.

Mike, too, was nervous about the reunions. While he had kept in touch with his friends through the years, and been present for their important moments, they were never as close as they had once been. Really it was Will that had held them together in the end, keeping Mike up to date on their lives, and keeping their friends up to date on his. El had been home for nearly two months before Will finally convinced Mike it was time to let the other's know, and they had been painful phone calls for everyone involved. Guilt from the others for giving up hope, and guilt from Mike as he came to realize the grudge he was carrying deep down for that same abandonment. He had known they had their own lives to live, but it had still hurt that they couldn't believe she was still out there. They all carried guilt and they all had to move forward, and tomorrow would be a first step.

While they would have liked to have a moment to reunite openly, Nancy and Jonathan were right there in the living room with his parents and Holly when Mike and El arrived, so they had to pretend to be meeting her for the first time, too. They played their parts well, graciously welcoming Jane with a warm handshake, El and Nancy exchanging a knowing look as they did so; they would find a private moment later to reunite properly. As Mike knew they would, the Wheelers loved Jane from the start and accepted her into the family, his parents thrilled their son was actually dating and not just focused on teaching and his research. His family naturally had questions about how they met, and they had a rehearsed back-story ready to go.

Christmas dinner was delightful, the conversation light, and everything went far better than Mike and El could have ever hoped for. After dinner, Nancy and Jonathan headed out to meet up with some friends from high school, after making sure Mike and El were staying the night and would be around the next morning. Nancy still wanted a chance to talk to El and welcome her back properly. Once

they had left and the table was cleared, Karen started on dishes in the kitchen, insisting the kids could relax in the living room. Mike, El and Holly took up positions across the couch in a post-dinner delirium, full, sleepy and content.

"Ted, can you give me a hand in here?" Karen asked, poking her head around the corner.

"Yes dear," he called back as he climbed up from his old recliner, folding the newspaper he had been reading.

Mike was more than a little surprised to see his dad actually leave the chair to help out. For that matter, the fact he was even still awake was a departure from the man he had known growing up. In truth, once he had started in on his work to build the portal and bring El home, he and his parents had pretty much stopped taking notice of each other. Sure, Karen kept an eye out, not understanding in the slightest what Mike was working on but making sure he emerged from the basement occasionally to eat and that he was keeping up with his school work. He had found early on that if he threw enough technical and science phrases into the explanation, he could tell her the truth about what he was doing without her really catching on. It was deceptive, to be sure, but it served its purpose and let him work without her interference. He had worked away in the basement for an impassioned focus, and his parents had lived their life upstairs.

As Ted left to help out with the dishes, the three of them stayed where they were on the couch, El snuggled up close to Mike's side, blissfully full and ready for a nap. Holly sat at the far end of the couch, watching them quietly for a few minutes as she wrestled with whether or not to ask the question that had been on her mind all afternoon. She was pretty sure she knew the answer, but she had to ask all the same.

Leaning close and checking the doorway to make sure neither of their parents were coming back, Holly whispered, "Are you Eleven?"

All the color drained from El's face, her heart starting to hammer in her chest. Unsure what to say, she turned and looked at Mike, his face equally pale. He pulled her closer to his side, an unconscious move of protection, already debating whether they needed to leave.

"How? What do?" Mike stammered, no clue what she knew, and how she could possibly know it.

The couple's reaction was all the answer she needed.

"Don't worry, Jane. Your secret is safe with me." she reassured, settling back in her seat, astounded she had actually been right. "Really, I don't even know what the secret is, but I won't tell anyone." After a pause, she added "I'm glad he found you."

"How do you know about her?" Mike asked, recovering from the initial shock. "About all of this?"

"Mike," she said quietly, with a comforting smile. "I know I was little when it happened, but I remember when you got sad. First you were a little sad, then you got really sad and then you started working on your science stuff in the basement. I knew this had to be her, because you're not sad anymore; because today is the first time in twenty years I've seen you actually smile. Not one of your forced smiles, tricking everyone into thinking you were fine, but a genuine, happy smile."

The very accusation brought a smile back to Mike's face. He looked down at El, still nestled protectively at his side, and saw she was looking back with a matching grin.

Turning back to Holly, he asked "But how did you know her name, or even that I was trying to find her?"

It was Holly's turn to pull on a conspiratorial grin. "The heating ducts had an echo. The vent in my room ran straight down to the one over your blanket-fort in the basement."

Mike could only stare at his little sister in shock as she continued.

"I used to sit and listen," she went on, more serious again, "when you'd call her on the radio. You used to do it every night, right after dinner. At first, I just wanted to know what the big secret was; why you were always down there alone. Why you never smiled anymore. Later, once I understood a little of what was going on, I listened because I was worried about you."

"You were worried about me?" he asked, touched that she had cared enough to even notice, at a time when he had felt invisible to the rest of the world.

"When you would get really bad, that's when I'd insist on you playing dolls with me, or taking me to a movie, or doing my hair; anything to distract you for a little bit and pull you back out."

"What? You're telling me you didn't actually need me to braid your hair for you all those time?" he teased.

"Mike, Nancy taught me how to do it when I was four. But it always seemed to make you happy, helping me out like that, so I would pretend I couldn't do it." She paused, and then with a laugh, added, "the first few times, I had to redo it myself after you left for school."

"You are always so focused on your work, you wouldn't notice me there, but I would sneak down to the basement sometimes and just sit on the top step watching you work. Making sure you were alright. You were so determined, I knew it was important, even if I didn't understand what you were building."

She stopped again, unsure if she wanted to reveal just how much she had seen, but she couldn't see the harm in it now that the story had a happy ending.

"I was there the day you made it through. The day with the ax. I was scared when I watched you step through and just disappear from the basement, but you seemed to know what you were doing, so I watched and I waited. When you came back, sweaty and covered in dust, I don't think I've ever seen someone so lost and broken. You laid down in the blanket fort and sobbed out an apology and a promise to keep looking. I knew you would probably get mad, and push me away, if you knew I had seen, so I decided I would help however I could in secret."

"That night, I sat there on the steps until you were asleep. I pulled a blanket over you so you wouldn't get cold. When mom went to call you up for dinner, I told her you were over at Dustin's. I knew if she saw you like that, she would start asking questions. After that, if things got quiet for too long down there, I would slip in and check on

you. If there was one of those red disks, and you were gone, I would make sure mom and dad didn't go down to the basement."

"Holly, I really can't believe you did all that. That you knew this whole time." His eyes were quickly misting over and he stood, pulling his sister to her feet and wrapping her in a hug. "I love you, Holly."

"I love you too, Mike." she answered, patting his back with a smile, "even if you are a weird nerd," she teased.

As he stepped back, El surprised them both by taking Mikes place and wrapping Holly in a firm hug. "Thank you. Thank you for watching over him for me."

"You're welcome Jane."

AN: Alright, I have to admit, this chapter was a lot of fun to write, with Mike and El working so hard to give each other an amazing Christmas. A big thanks (and a little good-natured blame) to TorontoBatFan for getting me thinking along those lines. This chapter grew much longer (in length and time to write) than I had planned, but I'm happy with how it all came together and I hope you all are too.

Also, you may have noticed, this story finally has a proper piece of cover art. I've had the image in my head since the beginning, but finally took the time to learn a few Photoshop skills to make an attempt at it. Still not quite what I had in my head, but I think it captures the spirit of it.

24. Chapter 23

Just before Ted came back to the living room, Mike assured Holly they would find a time to tell her the whole story; she had more than earned the right to know the truth. While she would have liked to stay the night and catch up with both her siblings, who she didn't see nearly as often as she'd like, Holly had to get on the road back to Chicago after dessert. She had plans with friends for an after-Christmas day out in the city that had been set up weeks ago, but she agreed to meet back up with Mike and El sometime soon to get acquainted properly. The rest of the Wheeler's soon began heading off to their respective rooms for the night. Nancy and Jonathan took her old room, while Holly's had been given to Eric, who yawned a sleepy goodnight after a third game of checkers with El.

Karen had apologized time and again that the only place left was the pullout couch down in the basement, Mike's old room having been turned into an office that served more for storage than actual work. They told her it really was fine, El secretly glad to be staying in the space once again, in its properly right-side-up form. Heading downstairs, they found the room was transformed from the last either of them had seen it. Most obvious to El, of course, were the lack of vines and a fire pit, but the space was changed from before that as well, from the week she hid in her blanket fort. For Mike, too, the room seemed brand new. Once he had a place of his own, all his equipment had come with him, leaving the basement empty of all but the old furniture pushed to one corner. In the years since, his parents had sorted through the accumulated remains of raising a family, replaced the dark wood paneling with a soft, clean white coat of paint and updated the furniture. The room felt alive in a way it never had before, for either of them.

"Merry Christmas, El," Mike whispered, pulling her in tight as they settled into the couch-turned-bed.

"Merry Christmas," she returned with a gentle kiss. "Thank you."

Mike had been a little worried that the room, with all its assorted memories, might lead to troubled dreams and the potential of being thrown, but the basement actually had the opposite effect. Mike

passed the night in dreamless bliss, waking early, refreshed and ready to face the day. Laying in the peaceful silence, he watched El sleep, a contented smile tugging at her lips.

El dreamed, but for once it was of a pleasant, happy memory she hadn't thought about in years; the day they snuck her to the school and into the AV room, to find Will through the radio. After the initial panic of getting her back outside as the fire alarms blared, they had taken advantage of the confusion to slip away with their bikes. While Dustin and Lucas had jumped on and started peddling, ready to get out of there as fast as possible, Mike had slowed everything down, keeping the pace something she could handle. It was the worst he had ever seen her drained, barely keeping her feet under her as she stood, and he had been so gentle and sweet with her, helping her onto the bike and making sure she had a good grip around his waist before slowly peddling toward home. Exhausted as she was that day, she hadn't wanted the ride to end, her eyes closed and head resting softly against his back. At one point, he had moved one hand down from the handlebars and rested it on hers, helping secure her grip around him and feeling for the slightest signs of her losing hold. In her dream, they just kept riding - past his house, away from Hawkins, away from monsters and bad-men and messes to be put right, even Dustin and Lucas falling away - just the two of them, peddling away in the warm sunshine.

The next morning, while Eric helped Karen in the kitchen fixing breakfast, Nancy and Jonathan slipped downstairs to finally reconnect with Mike and El properly. After regarding each other for a moment, Nancy pulled El into a tight embrace, choking out an apology. The thought had been nagging at her all these years, whether that night could have ended differently.

"We never should have left you alone at the school that night." Nancy said, guiltily.

"It's okay," El comforted, pulling back to catch Nancy's gaze. "None of us knew it would happen."

Nancy stepped back, nodding as she wiped gently at her eyes. Mike had told her the same thing countless times over the years, just as she had reminded him it wasn't his fault either. Both knew the other was

right, but still refused to let the guilt go. Jonathan stepped forward then, and after a moment's hesitation, pulled El into a sincere, if awkward hug. While had never actually spoken to her in those few short hours before she disappeared, he still owed her a debt of gratitude he could never fully express.

"Thank you," he whispered. "Thank you for finding Will. Thank you for giving me back my brother."

El pulled him in tighter, nothing more really needing to be said. In her mind, she still owed Will just as much thanks for keeping Mike from going insane, as they all felt they owed her for finding him in the first place.

The four sat around the basement and talked until breakfast, far more questions than there was time to answer. How she was settling in, lightheartedly making sure Mike was treating her right. She assured them Mike was being a perfect gentleman, and described everything he had done to smooth the transition. Both were stunned by her description of the garden he had built for her in World Eleven. While they would have liked to stay longer, so much more on their minds, the Byers family had to get on the road after breakfast, needing to catch their afternoon flight back to New York. By the time they pulled out of the Wheeler's driveway, plans were already started for them to fly out to Indianapolis for a longer visit in the Spring.

Later in the morning, Mike and El sat nervously waiting in the basement, Dustin, Lucas and Max on their way over. Dustin turned out to be the first to arrive, coming around to the basement door and knocking like old times. Mike opened the door and stepped aside, allowing him in and Dustin froze as he spotted El standing expectantly in the middle of the room. He had been fully prepared to see her, and yet it was still a shock after so long.

"It's really you," he said, simply.

"It's me," El smiled.

Stepping forward quickly, Dustin wrapped her in a bear hug, lifting her off her feet and giving her a quick spin.

"It's really you," he said again, laughing this time.

El found herself laughing along, his enthusiasm infectious. His curly mop of hair was trimmed short, ever so slightly beginning to thin. His teeth had sorted themselves out and he had leaned out as he grew taller. But it took only seconds for El to decide he was the same old Dustin and she hugged him tighter before he finally set her down.

"I wasn't sure if maybe Mike had finally cracked when he told us you were home, but here you are," he continued, getting more serious. "You know, Mike never gave up on you, not for a minute. We all told him he was crazy, but he always said he could feel you close, like you were right here in the basement with us still. He was ready to search the rest of his life, if that's what it took to find you."

Dustin's smile faltered, and then fell entirely at that last admission.

"I'm sorry we didn't believe him, El. I'm so sorry we weren't there to help him."

"It's okay, Dustin." El comforted. "You couldn't have known, not for sure. You had your life to live."

Dustin gave her a weak smile, seeing the truth of forgiveness written on her face.

Turns to Mike, Dustin repeated his apology, extending a hand. "I'm sorry I didn't believe."

While it had hurt, drifting apart from his best friends, Mike had already decided that the past was done, and they were all moving forward.

"Nothing to forgive," Mike said, bypassing Dustin's offered hand and pulling his friend into a tight embrace. "We're together now, that's all that matters."

With renewed smiles, they gathered on the couch to catch up, El wanting to hear all about Dustin's life now that he was back living in Hawkins and teaching. As it turned out, he had been assigned to the very classroom where El had made her final stand against the demogorgon. While it had been a tough room to face, he admitted

this school year had been a lot easier, knowing she was home and safe.

They were middle of discussing how Dustin had been selected to be a judge at the state science fair this year - the same one the party had won as children - when Lucas and Max arrived. Mike met them at the basement door with quick greetings and ushered them inside.

It was a surreal moment for Max, still not sure what to make of the woman standing in the basement where the party had once hung out, before Mike overtook the space with his research. The story had seemed too fantastic to have even a ring of truth to it the first time Lucas had told her. He had been doing his best to explain Will's flashbacks and why Mike was always shoving her away. She was certain it had all been made up at first, but she eventually came around, realizing things fit just a little too well in what happened to Will. She had confided in Mike that she knew and understood, but for a time he had continued to shut her out.

The turning point came a few weeks later, when Will had another flashback at school, a panic attack coming on strong in the middle of lunch one day. It was nothing new and the party had gotten good at handling the situation. Mike and Dustin each took him gently by the arms and guided him out of the cafeteria, headed for the quiet safety of the AV room, while Lucas gathered all their backpacks and remaining food. Somewhere behind them, they heard Troy make some derogatory joke like always, but they were focused on getting Will out of there. Only once they had him settled and calm again did they notice Max wasn't with them. It was later that afternoon they found out she had turned back and laid Troy out with a single punch. She got a two day suspension from school, Troy got a broken nose, and Max was officially a member of the party. Remarkably, it was Mike who put it to a vote and cast the first "ay." The party had their zoomer, though Mike still wasn't sure just what that title was really supposed to signify.

She had still been skeptical of the inter-dimensional aspects of the story for a while, but it was impossible to deny once Mike had the first portal working. If he could open a doorway into other worlds, how could she argue the possibility of monsters on the other side or the telekinetic girl from a secret lab who fought them. She had her

doubts about whether this girl could still be out there, but if Mike believed, who was she to stand in his way?

Now, here she was, back in Mike Wheeler's basement, the equipment long gone. In its place, the woman who Lucas currently had his arms around, offering pained apologies for not believing she was still out there, and for moving on. El gave the same consolations she had given Dustin, well aware of how impossible the search had looked to anyone outside her and Mike.

As Lucas stepped back, still in shock that El was really there, Max stepped forward and extended her hand.

"Hi, I'm Max. I've heard a lot about you."

"Nice to meet you. Mike's told me all about you, too." El said, stepping forward and pulling her into a hug. Mike had told her all about how Max had defended Will, and that was good enough for El to consider her a friend.

Greetings and reunions out of the way, the group sat around the basement like old times as Mike recounted how he finally reached her and the day he brought her home. He had been vague on the details over the phone, not quite ready to relive it all, but among friends in the comfort of the basement, the story came easily, El joining in to add her own details.

To better illustrate things, El stood and moved around the basement, pointing out how she had everything setup. She surprised herself with how the details flowed out, the Upside-Down already beginning to feel like some painful but distant memory she could face without fear. Dustin found himself laughing aloud at the image of El's demogorgon cloak, and the fact that she had worn it when she went out to greet Mike after 20 years, giving one last scare before their reunion. As the others caught up, Max sat back and watched in awe of the girl, practically a superhero in her mind, and contemplated the strength it would have taken to survive all that she had.

As the conversation lulled, Dustin threw out a request that had been nagging at the back of his mind.

"Are you still able to move things with your mind?" he asked.

Mike threw him an "are you serious?" look, while Lucas leaned over and smacked him on the shoulder.

"What?" Dustin asked in defense. "I'm not asking her to fight some monster, just moving something small. It was amazing to see and I was just curious."

While Mike and Lucas tried to argue how rude the request was, El couldn't help but think back with a smile to the time Dustin had asked her to float the toy spaceship. While she could have done it easily, she hadn't appreciated being put on the spot like it was some kind of trick to be performed on command. All these years later, she found his request charming, and decided she could do something just this once for him. While he was distracted by Lucas, El lifted one of Dustin's shoes from over by the door and launched it across the room and into his lap. A wide grin spread across his face, El giggling as she wiped at her nose, more out of habit at this point as there was no blood present. Max, meanwhile, stared in disbelief. They had all described the things El could do, but seeing it in person was still startling. Soon, they were all laughing as El tossed Dustin's other shoe at him to make her point.

The old group could have spent days catching up, but eventually they all had to part ways, promising they were going to make the effort to keep in better touch. As Hawkins was less than two hours away from Indianapolis, Dustin promised he would come their way for a visit. Max and Lucas left a standing invitation to visit them out in California if El was up to the idea of a plane trip. Encouraged by how well the morning had gone, El decided she was ready to take another step as they finished up lunch.

"I want to see it. The lab." El said, hesitantly.

"Are you sure?" Mike asked. "It's okay if your not ready. We can always come back another time."

In truth, Mike was nervous about going back there himself. He had his own ghosts haunting those dark and dusty halls, but she had faced far worse, so if she was ready, he could be too.

"I'm ready," she confirmed, reaching across the table and taking hold of his hand.

"Alright," Mike smiled. "We'll go check it out then."

Bundled against the December chill, they made the drive across Hawkins in silence, each playing out their memories of the old facility. For Mike, it had been a vital part of the search. He had made plenty of progress on his own, but it would be a lie to say the lab, and more importantly the late Dr. Brenner's notes, hadn't been the key to unlocking that door. Page after page, file after file, he had toiled away in the depths of the old building, learning everything he could about El and her abilities. Each page hurt to read, made him want to scream and cry and tear at his hair, but through that pain, each one had brought him closer to reaching her.

For El, the lab had been all she knew until the day she broke free of Brenner's grasp and made her way out into the world. Early on, he had been firm but kind to her, encouraging the development of her abilities. It was only as her powers grew that he became more determined, always forcing her to work harder, to push further. Even knowing nothing of the outside world, she could tell her treatment wasn't right. The seeds of escape first planted themselves in her mind when he started putting her in the bath, sending her thoughts out into the world. It left her terrified and exhausted, but he didn't care, only desiring more from her each time.

El was pulled out of her recollections as the car turned onto a bumpy, little-used gravel road.

"They have a pretty secure gate across the main entrance, at least they did the last time I was here. They usually don't bother fixing the holes in the fence around here, though," Mike explained.

Mike did his best to mask the nerves swirling around in his head as he drove. It had been almost seven years since he had been to the lab, and there was plenty that could have changed. He had found out from Will, that Dustin regularly took a drive out here just to make sure they weren't suddenly reopening the facility, so he wasn't worried about that. Security was another matter. He was well practiced at dodging the guards that were occasionally sent to sweep

the grounds, checking for anything out of place. Now that El was with him, the stakes were that much higher if they got caught.

Mike pulled the car to a stop beside a wooded stretch of the fence-line, smiling to himself that the hole he had cut there so many years before was still standing wide open. As they climbed out, preparing to make the short walk in to reach the building, Mike grabbed a backpack from the trunk, slinging it over his shoulders, before turning to El.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Mike asked her again.

El gave a small nod, staring through the trees at the barely visible outline of the old building, dark and ominous against the gray afternoon sky.

"Okay," he said, taking hold of her hand. "If you change your mind, just tell me, and we can turn back."

After squeezing through the gap in the old chain-link fence, they walked hand in hand across the grounds, soon reaching the parking lot and then the front door. As always, heavy plywood shutters blocked the original glass doors underneath in a fruitless attempt to keep trespassers out. A heavy chain secured the entrance, one Mike had opened countless times in countless worlds.

"Do you want to go in?" Mike asked, lowering the pack off his shoulders.

El nodded again, already sizing up the lock and deciding how best to break it off.

"It's alright, I've got the key," Mike laughed, holding up a sturdy pair of bolt-cutters.

With practiced ease, Mike put the blades against the lock's shackle and applied pressure to the handles. The steely teeth bit quickly through the bolt, the lock dropping to the ground with a thud. Pulling one shutter open, they stepped inside, Mike stopping again to put the cutters away and pull a battery-operated lantern and two smaller flashlights from the bag. While Mike slid the door shut

behind them, arranging the chain so it wasn't immediately obvious the lock was gone, El looked around the lobby. Every surface was covered in the thick layer of dust, and it brought a smile to her face to see everything in such disarray. Papa always insisted on cleanliness and order, and she knew he would be furious at the current state of his facility.

"What would you like to see?" Mike asked, unsure just what she would feel up to exploring, and what might still be too painful to face.

"My room," she said without hesitation, then looking down each of the hallways leading out from the lobby she added. "I don't know where it is."

Mike took her hand again and led the way down a corridor to their left. Despite living in the lab for her entire childhood, he knew she had only seen the select corners of the building Brenner had deemed necessary - her bedroom, the observation rooms, the basement. She had only been through the halls on her own one time, during her frantic escape, seizing an opportunity as the demogorgon tore its way through the lab. Following the route he knew all too well, wood paneling soon gave way to sterile white walls and El's recognition grew as they reached halls she was far more familiar with. Despite the years and all she had endured, despite knowing he was long dead and buried, she could still feel Brenner's presence around every corner. How many times had she walked these halls with him, one hand firmly on her shoulder, his firm voice explaining the latest task he had set for her?

They turned another corner and reached her bedroom, if the tiny cell could even be called that. With a trembling hand, she reached out pushed open the door, stepping into the painfully familiar room. The space was just as she remembered, feeling even smaller now that she was grown. The desk where she would quietly eat her meals, where she would sometimes color if Papa decided she had earned the privilege. The cabinet she knew, without opening the doors, still contained two of the flotation swimsuits she wore whenever he stuck her in the bath. The little bed where she would sit for hours, waiting for him to come and take her away, for training or testing.

The room held so many memories the air started to feel thick around her. Hours of silence, days of waiting. So much of her life had been spent here, quietly waiting for Papa to come, collecting her for a task, and then returning her to her little cage to wait once more. Years alone in the basement had given her time to think, and she had riddled out the purpose behind Brenner's treatment. The isolation had only driven her harder to push her mind out and make connections, desperate for any hint of human contact. Her childhood had been a carefully orchestrated experiment, and this room, which should have been her refuge, was just another key piece of his plan.

Looking around the room again, she began to take notice of Mike's presence as well. Documents, sorted into neat stacks, sat on her shelf, closed file-boxes standing off in another corner of the room. At her desk, more files, yellowed pages sticking out at the corners. An open notebook he had neglected to pack up on his last visit. Two old soda cans in the little wastebasket he had brought in from one of the offices. Even her bed contained traces of Mike, the sheets mused and the pillow dented by a body far bigger than hers was, the last night she had slept there. She hadn't put it together before when they talked about it, but he could have setup a little workspace anywhere in the building. She was certain there had to be bigger offices with windows and sunlight, but Mike had chosen to work right here, laboring away by lantern-light just to be close to her.

Her eyes returned to the bed, and then panned around the room, searching for a memory long forgotten. It had always been the last step whenever she made her bed, placed right in front of her pillow.

"What's wrong?" Mike asked, trying to read the frantic, searching look in her eyes, lit by the dim lantern.

"It's nothing," she said, trying to brush it off. "I'm sure they got rid of it after I ran away, to punish me when they got me back."

Mike gave her a questioning look, so El continued. "Whiskers. I used to have a stuffed lion I called Whiskers. Another one of Papa's gifts. An early reward for doing something awful, I'm sure, but it always made me feel better knowing I could lay in bed and hug it when I got back. I didn't even realize I missed it until just now."

"El, I have him," Mike began, bringing a questioning look to her face. "I brought him home the first time I came to the lab and found this room. I think, maybe, I just needed something to hold and remember you; to remember you were real. I wasn't sure how to bring it up, I didn't know if it would hold too many bad memories for you, but I have him in a box back home. Along with a few of your other things, pictures you drew that were still in the desk, things like that."

The smile of relief that washed over El's face flooded Mike's heart and he reassured her they would get the box out and go through it as soon as they were home. After a few more quiet, reflective minutes, El decided she was ready to leave. Mike gathered up the abandoned notebook and took one last look around at the files, mentally cataloging what was still there and trying to decide if there was anything worth taking. None of it was going anywhere, but somehow he knew this would be the last time either of them ever came back to the lab.

Walking the halls again, they continued in a circle of the space. While Mike made the offer, El decided she didn't need a visit down to the basement. She already knew the space was in disarray and nothing like she remembered, as the lab had tried to deal with the gate. It had brought a satisfied smile to her face when Mike explained how he had shattered the glass view-port of the bath, and that it would never hold water again, and that was good enough for her. As they made their way back along the observation rooms, headed toward the front entrance again, they reached a T in the hallway, a dead-end off to the right.

El stopped in her tracks, familiar memories flooding back. Heart pounding, she turned and walked slowly down to the end, where a heavy door lined with copper stood open. Mike followed a step behind, letting her take the moment she needed. She had told him about the dark room where she was sent as punishment. He had read about it in Brenner's own notes. Every time he thought about it, the mere idea infuriated him.

Dozens of images filled El's mind, every time she had failed one of Papa's tasks, or outright refused, and he had sent her away to be locked in this room until she was ready to behave. It was the room where she had first taken a life - two lives, she reminded herself -

when she refused to be locked up again. The memory tore at her heart whenever she thought about it, but it had been the first step of defiance that eventually led to her freedom. Of course, she had been locked in the room more times after that, Papa had just put her in the room himself, still confident she would never hurt him.

Breathing hard, El glared at the door with a hatred she rarely felt anymore. Mike watched as the door began to pull away from the frame, the sturdy hinges groaning in protest. As it tore free, the door buckled, crumpling about the middle as though squeezed by a gigantic fist. With a flick of her head, the deformed metal slammed into the room, crashing hard against the back wall. The thundering boom echoed through the vacant halls, the ghosts of her past fleeing before the sound.

El fell to her knees, breathing hard and nose bleeding, tears falling in a sobbed mix of sadness and relief. Mike knelt in front of her, gathering her into his arms, not caring about the blood soaking into the shoulder of his jacket. El had been terrified of returning to the lab, but she was glad she had come. She would never again be locked in the dark. The lab, as she had known it, was gone. Papa was gone. Despite their best efforts, she had survived where they had not, and none of them could ever hurt her again.

"Thank you," El whispered into Mike's shoulder, a smile slowly creeping back to her face. "I'm ready to go now."

Okay, author confession time. A few chapters back, when El and Mike were having the "where is everyone" talk, I said Jen was the only person outside the original party who knew the story. I could try to spin some sort of "true from a certain point of view" line, but the truth is, as I was writing that chapter it completely slipped my mind that Max wasn't a part of the party from the beginning. So I'm giving Mike the same explanation that I'm going with for myself. She was there for so long, basically from the beginning of his search, that it slipped his mind she wasn't there to have known El at the very start.

Call it a hazard of writing and releasing one chapter at a time, rather than completing the entire story and reviewing for

inconsistencies like that. I'm sure there have probably been others, though hopefully nothing too major as I've gone.

25. Chapter 24

After an exhausting afternoon at the lab, they decided to stay one more night with Mike's parents. It had been painful but ultimately a relief to return to the place where she had been locked away for so many years. El also decided there was one more thing she was ready to face, given how well the day had gone. She had been putting it off, in some ways even more nervous than she had been about walking the silent halls of the lab, but it was time. While Mike slipped away to make a phone call, arranging things for the next day, El helped Karen in the kitchen preparing dinner. Since none of her own children had ever taken an interest in cooking, she was delighted to have the help and was stunned at El's skills. By the time dinner was ready, El had made herself at home in the Wheeler kitchen and the pair were pouring through Karen's recipe-box.

"You hang onto this one," Karen teased her son, as Mike walked back into the kitchen.

He and El exchanged a knowing smile before she turned back to the card she was reading. Even though the guest rooms were empty now, they decide to continue using the basement that night, the space full of memories they were growing more comfortable with. In a moment of silliness and nostalgia, they threw together a little fort of blankets and pillows just for old times' sake, and the dreams remained silent, the monsters held at bay. For all the times they had passed sleepless hours alone in one version or another, there was a serene comfort in falling asleep together in the cotton-walled fortress.

The next morning, El's nerves were starting to get the better of her, and she started to wonder if they should call off the whole idea and save it for another day. While Mike loaded their suitcase into the trunk, El settled into the front seat, her hands fidgeting nervously. There was no reason to be this apprehensive, and yet she couldn't fight back the butterflies storming around her stomach.

"What if she doesn't like me?" El asked, breaking the silence as they drove out of town.

Mike glanced over with a reassuring smile before reaching out and

taking her hand in his own.

"Not possible," Mike said. "Anyone who meets you...it's impossible not to love you."

El blushed with a small smile. She was used to hearing the word from him, but it still brought a flutter to her heart every time he said that he loved her, and she hoped that reaction would never go away.

"She's your family," Mike went on. "She knows your story and everything that happened to you. She knows that what happened was out of your control, or your mother's."

He could see her expression out of the corner of his eye as he drove; she believed what he was saying, but her nerves weren't settling.

"If it makes you feel any better, I guarantee she is just as nervous. You're strangers connected by a painful past, but you're also family. She already loves you even though you've never met."

She gave him a smile, squeezing his hand as they drove onward. Whatever happened, she knew at the very least, Mike would be by her side through it.

Becky Ives sat at the kitchen table, her fingernails drumming nervously at the side of her coffee-mug. She had poured the cup an hour ago and it had cooled far beyond her liking, but she hadn't bothered taking a single sip. Apprehension fought with guilt in her stomach as she thought about the girl she was about to meet. She could still remember the day her sister went into an unexpected, early labor and that mad rush to the hospital, the emergency c-section and the devastating news that the child hadn't survived. She lost her niece that day, and in truth, that was when she lost her sister as well. From day-one, Terry refused to believe Jane was dead, insisting that Brenner and the lab had stolen her away, and a gulf had grown between the two of them. At first Becky told herself it was just the grief - Terry needed someone to blame and the lab made an easy target - but as time went by she clung tight to her belief and Becky began to lose her patience with the whole thing.

When Terry turned up at the hospital a few years later, dead to the

world and unable to care for herself, she had accepted that her sister had been unable to cope and went on some kind of bender that fried her mind. Out of guilt for not seeing how far her sister had slipped, Becky brought her home, to care for Terry herself rather than committing her to some institute. That had been the last Jane was spoken of until the day the Hawkins police chief had shown up asking about her, and how it might be connected to another missing child. She helped however she could, relating the things Terry had told her about the lab before her accident, and then she sent them on their way and tried her best to put it out of her mind again.

Of course, everything had changed the day that boy showed up on her porch dressed in an ill-fitting suit, carrying a stack of file-folders. She judged him as some intern from the County, come to discuss back-taxes or some new ordinance her property was suddenly in violation of, and she was ready to run him off. Instead he had the gall to stand there and say her niece was alive and that everything Terry had spent years yelling to anyone who would listen, was all true. As much as she wanted to believe it was some horrible joke, Mike had patiently gone through the files with her, confirming details Terry had only ever shared with her about her own time in the lab. He showed her notes and medical charts for a girl named Eleven, who's birth-date matched Jane's, and who's mother was noted as 'T. Ives.' A handful of photographs accompanied the files, tracking the girl's progress up to age twelve and Becky couldn't deny the family resemblance.

As much as she wanted to distrust Mike and the story he told, she couldn't find a good reason. He wasn't asking for money, or any other kind of help in his search. He wasn't looking for permission to tell Terry's story; if anything he said it was safer to keep it quiet. No, all he had wanted was to sit and talk to Terry, to tell her about her daughter. While Becky hadn't completely followed the explanation of where Jane was lost, she could hear the sincerity in his voice when Mike promised he was doing all he could to find her. Then last summer, the call had finally come; Jane was home. It had taken a while for aunt and niece to gather their nerves and agree to meet, but now it was happening and the guilt terrified her. Would the girl blame her for what happened to Terry? For not doing anything to come for her since? For not believing, when her sister shouted to the

heavens that her daughter was alive and imprisoned, right up to the day the lab destroyed her mind?

Becky tried raising the mug to her lips for a steadying sip of the cooled drink, when she heard the crunch of tires in the gravel driveway out front.

"This is it," she thought.

"This is it," El thought as Mike brought the car to a stop in front of the old house.

"Do you want me with you, or do you want to meet her on your own?" Mike asked, turning in his seat and taking hold of her jittery hand.

She shot him a look of puzzled concern and he returned a reassuring smile.

"Only checking. This is a big moment and I want to make sure we're doing it however you're most comfortable. If you need me to give you two some space, just let me know. If you decide you need to leave, that's just fine too."

She gave him an appreciative nod and unbuckled her seatbelt, stepping out of the car and gathering her courage. Together they walked up the front steps and on to the porch. After looking to El for one more confirmation that she was ready, Mike reached out a hand and knocked at the door.

The knocks echoed through the silent house, stirring Becky to her feet as she set down her mug. With a deep, steading sigh, she walked to the front door to greet the only family she had left. She could only pray Jane wasn't harboring any of the resentment Becky was certain she deserved. With trembling fingers she reached out and twisted the knob, pulling open the door to reveal the equally terrified woman waiting on the other side.

It took only a single look for any doubts in Becky's mind to wash away; this was really her, this was Jane. She could see so much of Terry in her face it was undeniable. She brought a hand to her mouth

to stifle a breath that caught in her throat, then gave in and let the tears fall as she reached out and wrapped El in her arms. El tensed for a moment, still adjusting to be hugged by so many new people in the last few days, before calming again and wrapping her arms around Becky.

El clung tight to her aunt, not really understanding the warm feeling that filled her. She had fallen in love with Mike's tenderness. She had grown undeniable feelings for her friends as they had helped her escape and start a life of her own. Those feelings had grown over time, piece by piece as experiences gathered. How was she feeling such immediate connection to this woman she had never even spoken to? She had formed a picture in her mind of what family meant, listening to Mike talk about his own, and she guessed this must be what he meant. Becky was family, the only connection she had to her mother, and it was a bond that nothing could sever.

When they finally parted, dabbing self-consciously at damp eyes, Mike stepped forward with a smile to make proper introductions. Becky led them inside, offering lemonade as they took seats in the living room. El had a swirl of questions running through her head - more than she could possibly ask during their visit - and had no idea where to start.

"What was she like?" El quietly asked. "My mother. Before."

Becky thought hard, at a loss for how to even begin summing up the sister she admired in spite of everything that had gone wrong.

"Brave, strong, fierce. She was ready to do whatever it took to protect the people she cared about. From what Mike's told me...told us...it sounds like you got that same spirit from her."

El blushed, casting a quick glance over at Mike who was watching her with his usual warm, adoring smile.

"Terry loved you," Becky continued. "Terry loved you more than life itself and never accepted for a second the idea that you were gone. When she couldn't get help from anyone with the power to do something, she took matters into her own hands to get you back. To the very end, I think a part of her always knew you were still out

there."

She paused, swallowing hard, the guilt rising up in her chest again. "Jane, I'm sorry I didn't believe her, not until it was too late. I just...I never believed there could be that kind of evil in the world; that a person could actually do those horrendous things to people. I don't know if I would have been able to change things at all, but I'm sorry."

El reached out and took hold of Becky's hand, her heart aching for the guilt her aunt carried. "It's okay. I understand."

More questions followed, easier to face. Their childhood, her mother's interests and passions. Becky grabbed an old, dusty photo album from the bookshelf and they sat together on the couch, flipping back to happier times. Mike, too, could see the family resemblance, particularly in a snapshot of a 10 year old Terry on a family trip to the Grand Canyon. Though her hair was longer and her smile carefree, she looked remarkably like the El he had first had the fortune to meet.

They flipped onward through high school and into college. El paused at the last photo, understanding the significance as she gazed down at the page. Terry was dressed in overalls, her pregnancy impossible to miss. She had one hand on her hip as she swiped a wide paintbrush down the wall, putting the finishing touches on a nursery, the crib already standing in one corner of the room.

"My room," El thought.

She ran a finger gently around the edges of the page, realizing that the yellowing snapshot was the closest she had come to the childhood she should have had with her mother.

A familiar anger tugged at the back of her mind and she had to take a steadying breath, letting the thought have its moment and then setting it aside. It was something she was working on with Will, arguably one of the harder aspects of coming home. The more she learned about the things she had missed, a childhood stolen away, the more the injustice would tug at her. It had been easier when she thought there were reasons she didn't deserve those things, but once all that was stripped away, hurt flooded in to fill the space. But Will

was helping, and she was coming to terms with it all. The moments that had been stolen were unfair and the people responsible were gone. She could honor her feelings and mourn the times she lost, but her best revenge on all that was taken away and those who took it, was to claim her life now, and live it.

Turning the page again, a card slipped out into El's hands. Flipping it over, she read her mother's name, two dates and a poem.

"Celebration of Life?" El asked, confused by the page.

"I forgot I had tucked that in there," Becky said softly. "That's the program from Terry's funeral."

"Oh," El whispered, sadly. Another moment she had missed, though one that might have been too painful to face in the moment, had she been there. "What was it like?"

"It was only a small group, neighbors and a few people from town that actually knew Terry. It was a warm afternoon, that was a bit of a blessing. It had been raining steady for three days leading up to the service, but that day the sun came out to bring a little comfort to everything."

El gave a small smile, picturing the scene and all too familiar with the relief of stepping into the sunshine and out of the cold.

"To be honest, when she passed, I wasn't even sure we were going to be able to do a service at all. The bills were piled up pretty high at the end and I couldn't bring myself to ask people for more help than they had already given over the years. I'm not sure how I would have given her the burial she deserved if Mike hadn't been there to help out with the arrangements."

El gave him a look of surprise, realizing it was a part of the story he'd neglected to mention. He'd told her how he had attended her mother's funeral, but never told her he had actually been there to help plan and pay for it as well. On top of everything else, he had been watching out for her mother and aunt Becky in a small way as well. The adoration in her heart swelled even more for him, realizing he had accepted her family as his own before she ever even met

them.

They talked another few hours before emotional exhaustion finally brought things to a halt. Hugs were exchanged all around with promises that they would see each other again soon. Though it was only early-afternoon, El drifted quickly off into a dreamless sleep as they drove, Mike's free hand clasped in hers. Whatever distance might separate them, she had her friends again. Mike's family had accepted her without hesitation, and now she had family of her own as well. The world may be a harsh, confusing place at times, but she knew she wasn't alone; not in the slightest.

There were a couple days left before the year drew to a close, and while Mike was looking forward to the milestone for the first time in decades, it also meant the end of break and a return to the day-to-day regimens of life. He relished their routine, the life they had started to piece together and the normalcy it gave - something they both desperately needed. Still, these last few weeks had been some of the happiest either of them had ever known, sleeping late, cuddled deep in each others arms, little care to how they passed the day and nothing urgent requiring their attention. To escape the wintry chill, they sought the warmth of the garden in World Eleven.

They sat in front of the cabin before a crackling fire one evening, both pleasantly lost in thought. The sun had just fallen behind the trees and dusk was racing toward them. Mike had one more present for El and he had been looking for just the right moment to give it to her. For the dozenth time in as many minutes, he felt gingerly at his pocket, ensuring the gift was right where it should be. He ran over what he wanted to say one last time, picturing all her possible reactions, and took a deep breath. He was just about to speak, when El broke the silence.

"Mike?" she began nervously. "There's something I want to ask you."

"Okay," he said with a smile, shifting to better look at her. As anxious as he was, he could wait a few more minutes so she could get out whatever was on her mind.

"We've talked a lot since I've been home, about where I fit. You told me I would always have a place here with you and that I was free to

go out into the world. You told me I was free to see other people, if that was something I needed. You told me that I don't owe you anything, and that my life is my choice."

Mike fought to keep his expression neutral, not wanting to interrupt the speech she had clearly been preparing for a while. Inside he was suddenly terrified, realizing he might have been reading the situation between them completely wrong.

"I've given this a lot of thought, just like you said I should, and I've made a choice. I want to go out and see the world. I want to experience everything I've missed. The world is a scary place, but I'm ready to face it; I want to face it."

Mike felt like a cold knife had been plunged through his heart, scarcely believing what she was saying. The choice was hers and it was everything she deserved, but that didn't lessen the pain. At some level, he had always known it was a possibility, maybe even probable, that she would feel the desire to venture out. She had spent her whole life like a caged bird, and eventually she was going to get that itch to spread her wings. And, just as he promised, she would always have a nest to return home to.

"I don't need to experience other people to know what my heart is telling me," she continued with a smile, oblivious to the turmoil raging inside Mike. "You brought me out of the storm and out of the darkness. I know I don't owe you anything, and that only strengthens what I feel. I loved you before I even knew what love was. I want to experience the world and there is no one else I want to experience it with. I've made my choice, and I choose you."

Slipping off the seat they shared, El dropped to one knee, holding up the silvery band she had secretly slipped from her pocket.

"Mike Wheeler, will you marry me?"

El watched as Mike's face twisted through competing emotions, trying to make sense of his confused reaction. She had talked over her decision with Will, during one of their weekly chats, and he had told her to follow her heart and trust what her gut was telling her. She had asked Jen if it was the right decision the day she took El out

Christmas shopping and they wound up at a jewelry store to pick out the band she wanted for Mike. Jen had assured her she was certain Mike would say yes, and yet El found herself suddenly doubting the whole thing. She was contemplating where to run, into the cabin or across the garden and back to the house, when a smile began to spread across Mike's face.

Time seemed to slow for Mike as he processed everything she had said. In just a few seconds, his heart had dropped to its lowest point - lower even than that day in the classroom when he lost her - and now it had pulled higher than he ever thought possible. She wasn't telling him goodbye; quite the opposite, she was telling him she never wanted to leave.

Rising to his feet, Mike took El's hands in his own and pulled her up with him.

"Yes." he said, barely containing his thundering heart. "Yes El, I'll marry you. Nothing would make me happier than being yours, forever."

El breathed a sigh of relief, her heart overflowing and the ring nearly slipping from her fingers as she threw her arms around him. Mike could barely suppress a laugh as he thought about what had just happened. He had been all set, with a ring and a speech of his own, and she had beaten him to it. He decided it was fitting in its own way for them; nothing else about their relationship followed a normal course or time-line, why should this be any different.

Stepping back, needing to finish what she had practiced countless times, El took hold of Mike's left hand and slid the band on his finger. She and Jen had taken their best guess at the right size, but it fit just perfect on his hand. The silvery, brushed finish adorned with a single winding black stripe glinted on his finger, reflecting flickers of firelight. Mike looked down, admiring the ring she had picked for him. While engagement rings were typically reserved for the bride-to-be, he had no objection to a constant reminder that his heart belonged to someone who loved him in return.

Remembering the question he had been about to ask, and still wanting to ask it despite already having the answer wrapped around

his own finger, Mike settled them back on the bench. Taking El's hands in his own, Mike quickly edited the speech running through his mind. There was a lot about choices, and reassuring her she didn't have to decide right now, that didn't really apply anymore.

"El, it has never been a secret that we share a connection, something that bound us to each other across whatever distance and forces tried to keep us apart. I've never been able to put the feeling into words, but I felt it the first time I laid eyes on a scared girl with a shaved head and a soaked yellow t-shirt. I didn't know a thing about you but I could see the pain in your eyes, and I knew I wanted to do everything I could to take that hurt away and protect you."

El listened as Mike poured his heart out, fighting to hold back the happy tears she could feel beginning to well up. She had felt it too, that night in the rain, knowing she had no reason to trust the boys who found her and yet it had only taken one look at Mike to know she would be safe with him.

"When I lost you, I felt like nothing would ever be right in my life again. But I realized I could still feel that connection, still feel you out there, and I knew I would find you again. In the darkest moments of my life, you've been there to give me strength and pull me through. I love you, and I can't picture spending a single moment of my life without you in it."

Letting go and freeing his left hand, Mike fished into his pocket as he continued with a smile.

"I guess the connection we share means we are thinking along the same lines, too. I had a question I wanted to ask you today as well. You've already answered it, really, but I want to ask it all the same."

Dropping down to one knee and holding up a ring of his own, the diamond sparkling in the firelight, Mike asked the question he'd waited 21 years to offer.

"El. My girl in the storm and the holder of my heart. Will you marry me?"

With an ever-widening smile, El nodded her head gently, the first

tears breaking loose from her eyes. There would be time later to laugh at the absurdity of their dueling proposals. For now, she was filled with something indescribable; a feeling of completeness that came from knowing they were of one mind in their devotion to one another. While she had come to the garden with every intention of asking Mike to marry her, now that he had asked her in return, she could barely hold her trembling hand still for him to slide on the band - another perfect fit.

Lifting her hand, El inspected the ring closer. A slender, mirror-polished band of white gold met in a swirl to clasp a single brilliant stone, countless facets throwing a rainbow of light in every direction. As she looked past her fingers, El's eyes met with Mike's and she lowered her hand, leaning in close.

"I love you," she whispered, before pulling him close and pressing her lips to his.

Mike pulled her in tight, never wanting to let her go. He was hers, and she was his. At some level, they had known since the first days she was home that this was how things would be, but there was comfort in having said the words aloud. As they separated and her gaze caught his again, Mike watched a new look crossing over her face, though he couldn't place it. Without a word, El took hold of Mike's hand and led the way up onto the porch and into the cabin.

They had taken a big step in their relationship, and El felt certain she was ready to take another. Jennifer had explained it during one of their early conversations, all those life-lessons El should have received years earlier. She had said there wasn't a right or wrong time, and that she would know she was ready when the moment came, though she had recommended waiting at least until she had made a decision about just what role she wanted Mike to play in her life. Jen had also warned that El would probably have to make the first move when she was ready, because Mike would hold back, not wanting to pressure her into anything she wasn't ready for. Now, El was certain. She knew where Mike fit into her life, and where she fit into his.

As they walked across the cabin toward the bed, a single lantern flickering gently on the table, El reached back from across the room

with of wave of her hand and gently pushed the door shut.

26. Chapter 25

The next morning found them like so many others, and at the same time, entirely new. Clothing still discarded, they held each other close and pulled blankets tighter to ward off the dawn chill. Their night together had been a tender expression of their bond, forged across two decades and tempered by distance. They each had moments of first-time awkwardness, but the strength of their connection brushed those quickly aside. Neither could say for sure if they ever slept, the whole night melding into one continuous and long-earned memory. There would be documents and ceremonies that made things more official, but as far as either were concerned, they were no longer two people but one, forever bound to each other.

As gentle shafts of light streamed through curtains fluttered by the morning breeze, El raised a hand to inspect her ring again. She had eyed plenty of options she liked for herself while picking one out for Mike, but somehow this one felt better than all the rest. Maybe it was the simple fact that Mike had chosen it for her, that gave it such a lofty place in her heart. Turning her hand this way and that, the single diamond caught a beam of sunshine and split it into a shimmering array of dots across the bed, the ceiling, and as she quickly discovered, Mike's face. She felt his body shift and she looked over in time to catch him smiling at her through squinted eyes.

"Good morning," she smiled back, leaning in for a kiss.

"Good morning," he returned, then added with a nod toward her hand, "You like it?"

"I love it. It's perfect," she reassured.

"Perfect ring for a perfect girl," Mike whispered, pulling her closer.

"If you keep saying sweet things like that, we're just going to have to do last night all over again," she teased.

"Perfect ring, for the world's most singularly amazing, wonderful, perfect girl who I never want to spend another day without," he grinned, pulling her lips to his as he rolled to his back, carrying her

along in his arms.

Eventually, the real world called them home; all the perfectly ordinary and wonderfully mundane tasks of life needing their attention. Mike returned to a new quarter of teaching and El returned to her studies, but everything felt like it had a new breath of life in it. Even more than in the fall, there was an air of reunion each night when El met him at the door. Tuesdays and Thursdays, Mike had a long break in the middle of the day and would bring home lunch for them to share. With so many restaurants surrounding the university, he made it a goal to pick out something different each time, surprising El with new dishes she hadn't tried before. She started taking notes of her favorites, determined to figure out the recipes to recreate them for herself.

While the Byers had already known both proposals were coming - Will had accompanied Mike through seven jewelry stores in his quest for the perfect ring - they were still ecstatic for their friends. Both couples spent the winter months helping the others through the preparations for their coming life changes. Mike and El went through the typical wedding decisions of Where and When, and Who to invite. The When came easiest: June 16th. While it would mean a Thursday wedding, they agreed the one-year anniversary of her return home was a fitting date. Their only hesitation were Will and Jen. They wanted their friends - so instrumental in everything they had to celebrate - involved in the special day, but knew they would have a one-month old baby in the middle of June. Jen quickly put their fears to rest, insisting that the happy couple should make whatever plans they saw fit, and she and Will would make it work.

In return, Mike and El helped out in whatever ways they could, as Will and Jen prepared for their impending arrival. El was thrilled to accompany Jen on trips out to buy everything the new baby would need. Mike could read the expression on El's face each time she returned from an afternoon helping to pick tiny outfits; there would be babies in their own future as well, something he would welcome openly when the time was right.

One Saturday in late February, Mike spent the afternoon helping Will put the finishing touches on the nursery. They had given the walls a coat of pale yellow paint the week before, and El and Jen had come

through and hung wall art of the most non-threatening jungle animals Mike had ever seen. That just left furniture. The dresser and changing table had been straightforward enough, just requiring a little muscle to get them upstairs from the garage. The crib was another matter, threatening to finally crack their remaining sanity. It was supposed to be one of the best you could buy, touted by every parenting magazine in publication, but there was a problem: the thing came in two carefully packed boxes of parts and hardware.

Mike and Will had carried the boxes up to the baby's room, grabbed the requisite screwdrivers and hammer and carefully laid out the parts before starting in. They were certain, between the two of them, they would make quick work of the project; after all, they had built dozens of model kits together as kids. Two hours later, they were ready to cut down a tree in the back yard and hollow it out with kitchen spoons, confident that would be the easier task.

"How is this even possible?" Will asked, realizing they had gone wrong yet again, one leg of the crib easily 4 inches shorter than the rest.

"You have a Ph.D. I literally figured out how to rip holes in reality. We cannot possibly be getting bested by flat-pack furniture," Mike sighed, dropping his hands in defeat.

"Did we anger a witch recently? This feels like a curse," Will teased, trying to psych himself up to disassemble the crib once again.

"None that I can think of," Mike answered with a laugh. "No, this feels more like a bad dream; the one where your trying to run but you're not going anywhere."

"We just need to go faster then," Will joked. "Coffee break?"

"Yes, please," Mike agreed.

In truth, he found himself wishing for something stronger for the first time in months, but one look at El settled on the living room couch with Jen as they passed, washed all those thoughts away again. He pulled a quick smile as their eyes met, but she could see the frustrations he was masking. It wasn't often she saw him like that,

aside from grading stacks of mid-terms and final exams, and it left her just a little worried. Curiosity got the better of her, and El stood, wanting to take a look at how far they had made it.

"Just don't let them catch you peaking," Jen teased, picking up on El's plan.

"They're talking Star Wars again," El answered, listening hard toward the kitchen. "I have time."

Will had finally made Mike take the time to sit down and watch the two prequel episodes that had come out while he was focused on the search, and the two of them had strongly differing opinions about whether or not the entire series had been ruined by the new films. El enjoyed the movies - all five of them - but didn't see what got the two of them so worked up. Jen had cautioned her early on that it was best to just let them hash it out when the two of them got going on movies like that. So, while Mike and Will debated Gungans and trade-federations, El slipped quietly up the stairs to inspect their progress.

Thirty minutes later, refreshed and ready to tackle the task again, Will led the way upstairs. He stopped short in the doorway, causing Mike to nearly crash into him.

"Nope. No, I'm done," Will said, turning back toward the hallway and throwing up his hands, beginning to laugh like a madman. "Moving stuff with her mind, fighting monsters, I can buy all that. But this? No. This I can't believe."

Mike stared at his friend, not comprehending what had suddenly set him off. Not getting an answer, he finally pushed his way past Will and nearly collapsed. El stood in the middle of the room, a look of panic on her face, worried by Will's reaction that she had done something wrong. The crib was nearly assembled, everything more level and square than he and Will had managed. The middle and one end were already secured together and El was holding that portion up with her mind while she shifted the other end into place, one bolt held in her hand ready to secure the pieces together.

For a few moments, Mike and El just stared at one another, until Mike finally broke out in a wide grin.

"How?" he asked, dumbfounded that she had managed to single-handedly assemble the crib that had resisted his best attempts all evening.

"Read the directions," she said, still not understanding their confusion.

It struck Mike then, that while he and Will had glanced over the instructions, they had more or less assumed they had a handle on how it needed to go together. It was more than a little embarrassing to realize how arrogant they had been, and how much easier the whole process would have gone if they had just read the booklet like they were supposed to.

"Here, let me hold the middle for you at least," Mike offered, stepping into the room and allowing her to let go with her mind.

It only took a few minutes for the final bolts to be secured and the job to be finished. Mike and Will humbly agreed that El got full credit for the crib, as the two of them muscled the bed into its final location. Looking around, they declared the room complete, now just needing a baby to call it home.

Among all the preparations and decisions they undertook, getting ready for the wedding, there was another that El felt they needed to take care of. It was something she was dreading, despite all of Mike's reassurances, but at the same time she knew in her heart it was the right thing to do. They had promised Holly they would give her the proper explanation she deserved, about who El was, how she had come into Mike's life, and just where she had been all this time. What had El nervous, was her decision to tell Mike's parents as well.

He told her it was her choice, and even Holly would understand if she wasn't comfortable telling it all, but El was determined, even if the whole idea scared her. They were going to be one big family and she didn't want everything to start off with a secret. Too much of her life had been a secret already, and some amount of secrecy would always be there. But with family she wanted everything out in the open, if nothing more than to remove the worry about something slipping any time they were around.

Mike invited them all over for dinner; one of the recipes El had picked up from Karen at Christmas. The conversation stayed light while they ate, discussing plans for the wedding - dates and locations, themes, foods, cakes - up until the moment Karen asked about guest-lists. An unmistakable cloud settled over the dining room and Mike decided it was the opening they had been looking for. He took hold of El's hand, giving it a gentle squeeze and looking to her for confirmation that she wanted them to know. Taking a deep breath, El met his eyes and nodded.

"There's something we need to discuss. Some things you guys need to know, and things you need to understand about Jane," Mike said. "It's important to her, important to both of us, that you know."

Getting up from his chair, Mike crossed to a cabinet in the corner of the room and retrieved the file-folder he had put there earlier that afternoon. Sitting back down, he pulled out the first page, a single piece of paper, carefully folded in half and yellowed by time. Holly had her suspicions about what they were about to share - the topic, if not the particulars - and she leaned closer. Karen watched in curiosity and even Ted took notice of the sudden shift and put down his fork.

"I need you to think back, a long way." Mike began, his voice grave. "I need you to think back to 1983, back to when Will went missing."

He paused, letting them recall that week. It was an event impossible to forget and yet one that had slipped to the back of their minds over the years after everything turned out alright, at least for what they knew of it.

"I didn't meet Jane last summer, like we told you at Christmas. I met her in Hawkins, that week when Will was gone."

A puzzled frown crossed Karen's face, trying to put together how Will's disappearance and meeting Jane could be connected. Though the time-line had gotten fuzzy over the years, she recalled the other events of that week and the pieces began to fall into place as Mike continued.

"Men who claimed to be from the FBI showed up at the house, looking for the girl with the shaved head. They told you she was a

Russian spy, some kind of weapon, and extremely dangerous."

Mike unfolded the page in his hands and slid it across the table, revealing the flier with a rough sketch of El that had hung by their kitchen phone for nearly a year. Karen looked back and forth from the page to the woman sitting across the table, her hand coming to her mouth to stifle a gasp. It took a few seconds longer for realization to sink in for Ted, who settled back in his chair with a heavy breath. Holly leaned closer, looking at the familiar page and realizing she had an answer to one of her great childhood mysteries.

She only had a few fragmented memories, and had been too young at the time to understand the significance of that day, when the men in suits went through their house from top to bottom, carting away boxes of things that seemed important. The poster, on the other hand, she remembered distinctly. She couldn't say for sure how long it hung in the kitchen, but she remembered the face watching over them as she sat on the counter while her mom cooked. When she asked her parents about it, they would brush off the question. Nancy was more of the same, always promising to tell her "someday." Mike, she realized looking back, wouldn't even acknowledge the question or look at the poster. She kicked herself for not making the connection between the poster by the phone and the person Mike tried to reach on his radio, though the page was long gone by the time Mike took over the basement with his research.

"Yes," Mike confirmed. "Jane is the girl they were looking for that day. And yes, I had been hiding her in the basement for nearly a week when they came for her. But the rest of what they told you were lies. Those men weren't FBI, at least not directly; they were from Hawkins lab. And Jane isn't Russian."

For the next hour, Mike walked his family through her tragic timeline, filling in the details of Brenner's twisted experiment. Terry's involvement early in the project, how she tried to get out when she discovered she was pregnant, Brenner's theft of Jane minutes after she was born and how he silenced Terry permanently when she tried to get her back. He described the conditions she grew up under, inside the lab, isolated and alone with a shaved head and hospital gowns. With trembling fingers, El slid the bracelet off her left wrist, revealing the tattoo marking her as experiment 011. Mike passed

documents across the table from the folder that backed up his explanations, and confirmed all that she had endured in Hawkins Lab. All three were visibly shaken when Mike explained that the first time she had ever even seen the sun, was the day she finally escaped.

"I don't understand, though," Karen began, "what was this experiment about? Why exactly did he want her?"

"Because I could do this," El chimed in, quietly.

Reaching out a hand, she fought back her nerves, knowing this would be the moment they would either accept her, or shun her as a monster. Slowly, the platter in the middle of the table containing the last few pieces of their roast lifted off the table. She gave it a slow, controlled spin a few inches above the surface and then gently set it back down. While Karen and Ted could only stare, dumbfounded by the demonstration, Holly sat back with an ever-widening grin of amazement. Pulling out the maroon handkerchief he always kept in his pocket, Mike passed it over to El, to dab away the trickle of blood forming at her nose.

He gave her a reassuring smile and another squeeze of her hand before continuing.

"She could also find people with her mind, to watch and listen to them from a distance. That was the ability Brenner wanted to exploit, turning her into a spy to keep an eye on the Soviets and anyone else they wanted. But, out there in the void, following her captors orders, something found her instead."

Explaining the Upside-Down and the creatures that lived there took a little more work. Holly followed it a little better than their parents, though even she was astonished by the revelations. Mike chose his words carefully, both for his family's sake and for El. He was determined to make it clear the portal in the lab, the demogorgan, what happened to Will, none of those things were her fault. Everything that happened was because the lab had exploited a terrified child with abilities they didn't understand, nor could they control. As he had promised, none of his family blamed El, only looks of sympathy and amazement coming back across the table.

Reliving that fateful night, finally giving his parents the truth of what happened at the school, was difficult to say the least. Explaining the pool, and just how she had found Will, was astonishing, but fit with everything else he had told them so far. The lab had said El had tricked the boys to the school that night, and had killed people to avoid capture, proving just how dangerous she was. Not sugar-coating things, Mike admitted she had killed, but in defense of himself, Dustin and Lucas, when it became clear the soldiers were ready to kill them to get to her. There wasn't a dry eye at the table when Mike described her final showdown with the demogorgan, speaking aloud the nightmare that had haunted him for 20 years.

Mike described for them, as best he could, the world where El had spent the last twenty years and all she had done to survive. While she could have probably explained it better, she had wanted Mike to do the talking, not trusting herself to get through it. Even as he spoke, El found herself wincing at the memories. Holly couldn't help but notice as El scooted ever closer to Mike, and the way his arm went protectively around her at each mention of the creatures that were both predator and prey, fighting against her survival.

He also described, in detail for the first time, just what he had been undertaking in the basement to get her back, and that explanation included a demonstration. While Mike had little desire to step back through the gateway into unpleasant realms, he knew it would drive home the fact that everything he had told his family was real. He and El had chosen the world carefully, one with the right conditions to match where she had been, but a version utterly devoid of life. It was accurate enough for them to understand the cold isolation and the choking air, but safe enough for them to visit without concern.

Pulled close to Mike's side, El took a deep breath and reminded herself this was a safe world and it was only for a minute. She had gone through with him earlier in the afternoon, just to prove to herself she could do it. Still, it took everything she had to make that first step through the portal and back into the darkness. His parents and Holly followed a moment later, astonished at the immediate change. A mist of spores swirled in thick clumps and black vines covered a landscape that was clearly still Mike's backyard, the darkness penetrating and a stiff chill in the air. Karen and Ted

stepped back through the gate right away, but Holly stood transfixed, looking around cautiously with a puzzled glance at El, before going back.

The demonstration had the impact they desired, and after stepping through to the safety of the garage, Karen gathered El into a hug. Through a tearful apology for everything El had endured, she stared daggers at Ted for so readily accepting the agents story and opening their home to them. He recognized the look and understood; it paired nicely with the guilt he was feeling for the same reasons.

Over dessert, a pie Mike was proud to say he made himself, they talked about what all this meant moving forward. He was almost certain all remnants of the lab and the old programs were gone, but they still weren't taking any stupid risks. If it got out, the things that El was capable of, that could still ruin her chances at the safe and normal life she deserves.

"Your secret is safe with me," Holly said, reaching across the table and taking El's hand, reaffirming the promise she had made at Christmas.

"Us too," Karen added with a quick glance at Ted, who nodded in agreement. "You're family now. Actually, I guess you've been family for quite a while."

After a round of coffee and more questions, the group finally decided to call it a night. Karen and Ted had already arranged for a hotel room that night, knowing they wouldn't want to deal with the drive back to Hawkins. Holly was going to stay the night, El offering up her room since they were exclusively using Mike's at that point. They even had plans to redecorate his room before the wedding, picking out furniture and finishings together, officially making the space theirs, together. After waving goodbye to his parents from the porch, Mike and El stepped inside and were met by Holly, a question obvious on her face.

She had watched El's reactions at the table, reliving the mere descriptions of the world that had imprisoned her. Those reactions didn't seem to jive with the ease in which she had stepped through the gateway in the garage and into that dark, desolate landscape.

They had promised to tell her the full story, and even though she was certain it was probably too much to ask, curiosity was getting the better of Holly.

"So now that they're gone, where were you, really?" Holly asked. She could see the offense of her question wash across their faces, mistaking her meaning, so she clarified. "Sorry. I mean, I believe you were in another world, just like you said. I just don't think the one you showed us was it."

"You want to see the real thing?" Mike asked, flatly. On some level, they had been expecting the request, knowing she would see through the holes in their earlier demonstration.

"Why?" El asked, not offended but curious.

"I'm sorry," Holly apologized. "I know it's a lot to ask. I just want to understand what you had to deal with, how a place like what you described can even exist. I spent years watching Mike step into one world after another, and a part of me has always felt guilty I didn't tell him I knew and offer to go with him. I know he would have told me it was too dangerous, and he's probably right, but I just want to know what he was actually stepping into."

Mike and El exchanged a glance, and she gave him a small nod; they had discussed this inevitability, too. She knew Mike understood the dangers, and had stepped in and out of countless worlds searching for her. He would protect anyone he took through with him and she trusted his decision, but this was the one world she couldn't step into with him. El could step up to the doorway of the Upside-Down, but no further. If Mike had his way, he would never step back there either, but he knew Holly deserved to see it. She deserved to know the kind of places he went, while she stayed behind running interference so his parents wouldn't find out and put a stop to the whole thing.

They all walked into the garage again, and Mike made a few adjustments to the computer connected to the gateway, entering the address of El's prison, the true Upside-Down where she had been trapped for so long.

"I can take you in for one minute. Sixty seconds, no longer." Mike said gravely. "You stay by my side and we stay by the gate. If I say back, you get back through, no questions asked. Deal?"

Holly nodded, the gravity settling in but her curiosity only growing. "Deal."

Stepping over to a heavy steel cabinet, Mike swung open the door and retrieved a machete, passing it over to his sister. In most worlds, going in armed was a precaution. Here, he knew exactly what horrors waited on the other side. He turned back, the door obscuring whatever else he was gathering, and Holly looked down at the blade in her hand, turning it this way and that, getting a comfortable grip on the handle. She looked up again as Mike swung the door shut, pumping a round into the chamber of the shotgun he was now holding.

"You're sure?" he asked, leveling a hard stare at his sister.

She nodded, swallowing hard but determined to see this through.

"Sixty seconds, in and out. I promise," Mike said, stepping over to El and pulling her into an embrace.

"Seventy seconds, I close the door," she teased with a nervous laugh, neither of them entirely sure just how serious she was. Mike activated the gate and he stepped through with Holly. This time, for safety, he shrank the opening to a pinprick and the world became painfully dark. Where the demonstration world had been uncomfortable, this Upside-Down was in the midst of a winter storm. The air was a torrent of sleet and spores, the cold blistering. Sounds of life were all around them, chittering and rustling in the bushes. Mike swung the shotgun back and forth, the flashlight affixed to the barrel sweeping a wide band of light across the desolate landscape. Something streaked out of the bushes, perhaps the size of a cat, pursued closely by something bigger but just as fast. Mike followed them with the light until they disappeared into the bushes again on the far side of the yard. Moments later, a piercing shriek cut through the night and he knew the chase was over.

Mike felt Holly begin to step backward and he hit a button on the

remote to re-expand the gate just in time for her to stumble through. Mike followed, gun pointed carefully at his retreat until he was back in the garage and slammed a palm on the button to shutdown the doorway. Glancing down at his watch, he felt a small smile tug at his lips; 23 seconds. Holly had seen everything she needed to see, everything it took to understand El's world, in 23 short seconds.

He turned around and saw Holly wrapped in El's arms, sobbing out apologies of her own - for all she had endured, for the place she had been trapped, for not being able to help Mike find her sooner and for making Mike take her in now to satisfy her curiosity. El smiled and held her tight, whispering reassurances that it was alright. Holly turned to Mike, her sympathy for El twisting into something else for her brother - anger, confusion, she couldn't really be sure - and she pounded an ineffective fist against his chest as he folded his arms around her.

"How could you do that?" she sobbed, adrenaline crumbling away. "How did you go into worlds like that, over and over? How could you leave us, never knowing if you'd make it back?"

Growing up, she had watched the glowing red disks from the top of the stairs, never knowing what might be on the other side. She knew her brother went somewhere when he stepped through, but in her mind she had always pictured it being other places in their own world, like a secret passage into other countries. Once or twice, she pictured it taking him to other points in time, still in their house but years ahead or in the past. That thought always gave her some level of comfort, home feeling like it would be a safe place, whenever he was. Even tonight, as he described the actual worlds he had been to, it still felt too abstract to have been dangerous. The world he had taken their parents to, while it was a little chilly and the spores an annoyance, had almost felt peaceful. But where El had been, the reality where she had struggled and fought and survived, and the kind of places Mike had stepped into and searched more times than she could fathom, there were no words to describe that kind of hell.

Mike held his sister tight, rocking her gently as the shock of the world settled in. His eye's caught El's, and the answer flooded through him as it always had.

"I went through, because I knew she was still out there. I knew the kind of world that held her captive, and what it had nearly done to Will. I knew that if I didn't make it back, you guys would be alright; you had each other and would survive without me. But I couldn't survive without her. My life didn't mean a thing until I could get to her."

AN: Schedule

So our story is nearing its close. There are two more chapters and an epilogue to go, in addition to a final one-shot chapter that will be added to the Long Search, to put a bit of a bow on everything. I will be trying, though I can make no promises, to get another chapter of this story out before the end of the month. After that, I will be taking a hiatus for the month of November as I plan to participate in National Novel Writing Month.

I've had a few original-fiction ideas rattling around my head for several years now, with a dream of trying to get something written and maybe even in the hands of publishers. Before finding this community, I always thought it was an unrealistic dream and something I didn't have the talent or skill to even attempt. However, thanks to all of the amazing support I have received over the last two years here, I think I just might be able to do it after all. The challenge is 50,000 words between Nov 1 and Nov 30th - a daunting task to say the least - but I have outlines and notes, storyboards and a few days scheduled off from work, so we will see what happens.

Rest assured, whatever happens, I will be returning to this story on December 1st. My goal will be to wrap up these final chapters by New Years. After that, I'm not sure what comes next, but I have several outlines started, plus a backlog of ideas and a few requests. I love Mike and El far too much to just set them aside.

27. Chapter 26

The wedding was planned, and things were feeling right with life. Winter was slowly giving way to Spring, and El was beginning to plan flowers for the backyard, anxious to get a little of her own touch on the space. She had also convinced Mike they should put in a small vegetable garden this year - lettuce, tomatoes, carrots; just a handful of the things she bought at the store each week. Really, it had taken little to convince Mike, El's infectious enthusiasm more than enough to make him pull out a shovel as soon as the ground thawed and start clearing a space for growing.

While Mike had put it off for as long as possible, he knew there was a pair of decisions they had to face, and it was probably time to do so. He had held off until he knew whether or not El was going to move on, but now that she was staying for good, he could take that step. While El initially said the decisions were his, and she trusted and supported whatever he chose, Mike insisted that he wanted her opinion as well. What he chose would affect her just as much as it would him, so it was only right that she was included in the process.

From the beginning, Mike had viewed his degrees, and later his position at the university, as a means to an end. While he found the field interesting enough, and he had proven he was good at it, it was never what he had intended to do with his life. They had put him in exactly the right spot, with the resources he needed, to find El and bring her home. Now that she was back in his arms, safe, healthy, and happy, he felt no passion for the work any more.

He had no doubt he could live out a comfortable career just coasting along, continuing to teach his classes, submitting the occasional paper to various journals and doing the sort of research that would keep the university satisfied. But he had spent the last year encouraging El to find what made her happy, and he owed it to himself to do the same.

Growing up, he had contemplated a lot of careers, but always he seemed to find his way back to one in particular. While it wouldn't be an easy road, he had wanted to be a writer. As much as he loved spending time with his friends, playing out a D&D campaign, his

favorite part was actually the story crafting before hand. The adventures his friend's characters could go on, and the worlds he could build around them, was fulfilling in a way little else in his life had been. He had stories that had been rattling around in his head for years, though he had kept them pushed away to focus on more important matters. Now, with El home, and inspired by the series of books he had begun working his way through, all the old ideas were coming back to the surface.

El supported the idea, of course, confident in his ability just from the enthusiasm with which he described a few of his initial ideas. There was the matter of money while he got started, though he could always continue teaching for a few more years until he got published - if he could get published - and see if it would support them. There was another possibility, but that all hinged on his other and much larger decision: what to do with the two decades of research he had hidden away.

For years now, when he would allow himself to picture what life might be like once El was back - because he was certain she would someday be home - he had wrestled with what to do with everything he had built to find her. He had worked out the physics of traveling to parallel worlds. He had formalized a theory of how the universes were structured, joined and branched away from one another. He had built the practical machinery necessary to open doorways into any one of the universes he desired. He had cataloged, at a minimum the address and basic structure, of millions of these worlds, and explored hundreds.

His gut instinct, now that El was home, was to take all of it to the abandoned gravel pit north of the city, pile it into a heap and burn every scrap of it to the ground. What he had developed, in the right hands, could advance the human race faster than ever before. But he wasn't stupid. It had taken all of 10 minutes to picture a dozen ways it could, in the wrong hands, bring about the destruction of mankind as well. Without an appreciation of what lurked on the other side, someone could open a large doorway into one of the worlds where Earth doesn't exist, and begin emptying their world into the vacuum. Someone could, knowingly or not, throw the doorway into the Upside-Down wide open and unleash monsters upon the world. A

single demogorgon, inadvertently let in, had wreaked havoc on Hawkins and only El had been able to stop it.

Far less accidental, he could imagine a military power weaponizing the technology as well. It would be simple enough to find an unoccupied world, bring an army through, march them within enemy borders and open another gateway back to Earth. Pour an entire army onto the streets of an enemy capital and the war would be over before it began. Less soldiers would die, perhaps, but people would suffer immeasurably from the new instability that would reign across the globe. While he wouldn't be the one pulling the trigger, the destruction could be traced back to him. The name Wheeler would join the likes of Oppenheimer, as a great Destroyer of Worlds.

Everything he had built could either cause humanity to flourish or bring about its final destruction, and he couldn't face the pressure of making the decision. He had talked it through with Will over countless drinks, and a few times with a clearer head as well. He had talked it over with El, too, and she had her thoughts on it. She, better than most, understood the ramifications of power in hands that don't know how to wield it. But she could also see the good that could come from it. The world was a big place full of people, and the ability to spread out with less competition could have its benefits. Whatever he chose, El supported Mike, and knew it would be the right decision.

It was the last week of March, when the campus was shut down between terms, that Mike knew how he wanted to handle things, and scheduled a meeting with Carl Anderson, his department chair and the man who had taken a chance on Mike as a grad student doing promising research in magnetic imaging.

"I wanted to do this in person, because it deserves more than just a letter," Mike began, mustering the courage to close this chapter of his life. "I've decided I won't be returning in the Fall; I'm ready to be done teaching."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I hate to lose you," Carl said after a stunned pause, Mike's departure the last thing he had been expecting. "Your students all speak highly of you, and your research has been beyond exemplary. I can't tell you how many times over the years I've had to

fend off the Physics department when they talk about trying to poach you away. Can I ask what brought this on?"

Mike did his best to explain, in abstract terms, how the field had never been his passion, just something he turned out to be good at. It had been a means to an end, that he couldn't really explain at the moment, but that its purpose was complete and it was time to move on.

"Before I leave," he continued, reaching into his worn leather bag and pulling out an old, dog-eared notebook, "I have something I want to sell to the university. Call it my life's work."

"Mike, that's not really how this works," he said, leaning back in his chair with a small laugh. "Believe me, we all have things we'd love to sell, but the university already owns, or at least has some rights to, all your work from your time here."

"I know," Mike agreed with a smile. "This is something a little different. I suppose the university owns a portion of it; I've certainly made advances in my time here. The original findings go back further than that, though."

"You had a similar clause when you did your graduate work in Chicago, so really that would only complicate things further."

Mike sat in silence, the small grin widening on his face.

"Undergrad research?" Carl asked, leaning forward in his chair again, suddenly intrigued at just what the notebook might contain.

"I guess if it goes back to the beginning, I was between institutions at the time. If it came down to it, the Hawkins Middle and High Schools could fight over it, or maybe since they're one district they could try to jointly claim it. Do public schools have any claim over student research?"

"Alright, now you have my attention," Carl admitted. "What exactly is it you have there?"

Mike slid the book across the desk and sat back as Carl began to flip through the initial pages. While the original copies of his notes were

spread across a whole shelf of notebooks and journals, he had a few where he distilled all of the important findings and equations in a more coherent form. While he was only skimming, Carl recognized enough of the equations and diagrams to form a picture of what Mike had been working on.

"Your joking, right?" he said with a chuckle. "I mean, they're important theories, sure, but without a practical application they aren't of much use."

Mike just watched in silence, holding his comments back as Carl continued flipping, equations and theory giving way to early plans for the portal devices.

"So, it looks like a little of everything in there. It's been a few years, but I recognize Alders and Schwartz, with a little Einstein in there for good measure; I see what you're getting at. About all you're missing is Everett," he said, continuing to scan the pages as they slowly turned. "Never mind, you've got him here too. You're talking about one of the Holy Grails of physics here, Mike. You're not the first, not even the thousandth, but like I said, it's all just theory. Alders work showed that the energy requirements, if it were even possible, would be unfathomable."

Mike just smiled back, the objection expected and his rebuttal ready to go. He had to admit, he felt just a little bit of pride finally presenting his work to someone who knew the theories and had long ago brushed them off as an impossibility.

"Alders' harmonic coefficient was too high, by almost a billion-fold; page 23," Mike said quietly. "Once you drop that down, the energy requirement becomes almost embarrassingly reasonable."

Carl could only stare, the realization dawning slowly, Mike's confidence betraying his progress. "Are you trying to tell me, you've made it work?"

"I ran the first one off the dryer circuit in my parents basement." Mike admitted with pride.

"It's not possible," Carl said, standing suddenly from his chair and

beginning to pace the room. "It's all theory. I mean, the stuff of science fiction. Other dimensions, other worlds. It's just not possible, Mike. Is it?" he asked, suddenly stopping and looking at Mike again.

"It's not quite what Everett had in mind, but it's close," Mike confirmed. "There's a lot out there."

"Okay," he said, dropping into the chair again, suddenly exhausted. "So you want to sell this? What's your price?"

A demonstration was set for two days later. Carl would be joined by Howard Bergman, the Physics chair who had been trying to steal Mike away for years, and Grace Scott, Dean of the College of Sciences - the person with the authority to make the sort of deal Mike was looking for. Mike and El carefully dug through the collection of worlds he had cataloged, selecting destinations for a carefully curated tour that would demonstrate not only the viability of the machine but also the diverse worlds that exist just beyond the doorway. They spent an afternoon moving the collection of computers and test-rigs from his home lab to the industrial park, putting his entire workforce on display in a single location. While he had only run them off and on since El had come home, he set them all to work again, climbing ever higher in the address-space, cataloging whatever they could find.

The day of the event, Mike donned his old exploring outfit again, looking the part of Indiana Jones one more time. Boots that had stomped through the mud in hundreds of decaying worlds. The leather coat, stained with the blood, sweat and tears of countless failed searches. Atop his head, the Stetson representing a promise fulfilled. By his side, El was similarly attired for the day, boots and jeans topped with a dark canvas jacket. Their stops for the day wouldn't be anywhere dangerous, and the attire was probably overkill, but Mike had an impression he wanted to make on their visitors; the first outside their circle of family and friends that would be privy to the information.

The trio arrived together, stepping into Mike's lab and looking around in wonder at the test-rigs arrayed along one wall, their clicks and hums filling the air as they cataloged their assigned worlds. After exchanging pleasantries and introducing El to Howard and Grace -

Carl having already met her at a department party a month earlier - Mike silenced the rigs so they could speak more easily.

"So," Grace began, "Carl has been rather tight-lipped about just what you intend to demonstrate today. Only that it is a breakthrough of incredible value that you want to sell to the university. As I'm sure he's already explained, we can't exactly buy the rights from you for the research you've been doing, but other compensation can be arranged in special circumstances. So what do you have to show us?"

With a smile, Mike started into his presentation, carefully rehearsed. El hung back during the initial explanation of everything he had discovered, and the advancements he had made. In those moments, she couldn't help but remember with a smile a much younger but equally confident Mike Wheeler, explaining to her how everything would turn out alright. It had taken longer than either of them could have ever imagined, but he kept his promises.

As they started out on the grand tour of worlds, she was right by his side, stepping through each gateway arm-in-arm with him as they led their guests into each new world. They marveled at the sparkling waters of the world Mike had first opened with a pained expletive at a stubbed toe. Mike led them into the world of "Don't" to show them animal life unlike anything they had ever seen before. While he had been hesitant to return, it was cathartic to finally visit with peaceful intent. The plant-nibbling inhabitants showed neither recognition nor fear of Mike as he led the group through flowery fields.

While the air was too thin to remain for more than a few minutes, Mike took the group through to one of the more mesmerizingly curious worlds he had cataloged. The impact on this version of Earth that had scatted chunks of the still-molten planet into orbit had created not one, but two moons. The group stared in wonder at the twin bodies, one just cresting the horizon, the other high in the sky. While tectonics and tides had left this version of Earth less habitable, it gave a clear demonstration of the subtle differences that led to drastically different outcomes in each world.

As they returned to the lab, the principle tour complete and minds reeling from all they had been shown, Mike called up one final address: 011M-011K-011.OH. While the space around the lab wasn't

nearly as perfect as the garden near the house, El's world held a simple meadow in this spot. He had often visited when he needed to step out of the lab and clear his head for a few minutes. This morning, in preparation for their guests, Mike and El had brought through a folding table and a set of chairs. As the group stepped through and into the bright mid-day sunshine, they were met by a simple lunch spread - sandwiches and sodas - and it had the desired effect to put the trio at ease.

Over lunch, Mike laid out a little more of all he had found, and his concerns of the ways it could be misused. Currently, he had a basic catalog of 8,023,500 worlds. Of these, he had stepped into 537 himself. With a dire warning, he stressed how a handful of worlds were extremely dangerous, and should not be visited. Some others were completely devoid of life, and needed further investigation to determine if they were safe to enter. There were a few worlds - seven to be precise - that needed to be handled with extreme care. These were inhabited by huminoid creatures, close cousins to themselves, who appeared to be of similar intelligence and evolutionary advancements. There were not as many of these worlds as one might think, the human design an apparent rarity among the cosmos, but still civilizations were forming on these worlds - a few already as advanced as us upon first look - and needed to be protected.

"Unless you have pulled off the most masterful illusion I've ever seen," Grace finally began, "then I think it's safe to say you have turned pretty much every discipline of science on its head. I never thought I would witness a breakthrough like that in my lifetime, if such a thing were even possible, and you've done it singlehandedly from your parent's basement."

"Now you see why I've been trying to steal him away from Carl all these years," Howard threw in with a laugh, still overwhelmed by the days events.

"I'm hesitant to ask," she went on, ignoring the comment. "Seeing as you can't even put a price on what you've demonstrated here today, just what kind of compensation are you trying to get for all this?"

"I can assure you, I'm not asking for much." Mike smiled. "Three things, that I think you'll agree are reasonable. First, while I will be

retiring from teaching, I would like to continue drawing my salary and benefits, following the normal pay-scale increases. No special deals, just things continuing as though I were still on staff. Number two, this doesn't get presented to the world as *MY* discovery. Whatever papers are published, whatever findings are released to the scientific community, credit can go to the university and whomever verifies and continues the work. If I had my choice, my name would be detached entirely, but a few people, who's opinions I trust, have told me I deserve to at least be mentioned."

This second request stunned the group. While none of them were in their respective fields for fame and glory, they couldn't say they would be opposed to their names going down in the annals of history.

"You don't want your name associated with all this? Even if you don't want all the credit, your friends are right, your name deserves to be tied to this. You've done what most of us can only dream of." Grace said, then after a pause, asked, "Can I ask why?"

Mike laid out his reasons, the good and bad he had already touched on, of just how the technology could steer humanity. He had forged the sword, but he knew he wasn't the one to decide how it should be wielded. He had another reason, which he explained was not to leave the world where they currently sat.

"Almost 22 years ago, I lost something precious to me, something irreplaceable, and all of this is what it took to get that back. That precious thing has been returned to my life, and I have no more need for the rest. It's time the technology was put into hands that can continue to do good with it."

The look he gave El during the admission, and the blush that rose to her cheeks in response, was impossible for the others to miss, though they couldn't even begin to fathom just what all he meant by it. All the same, they could respect the reasoning behind his hesitation to take credit.

"You said three terms. What's the third?" Carl asked, breaking the moment.

"This world right here," Mike said, gesturing around them. "It doesn't

hold any significant resources, nothing that can't be found on countless other worlds, but this place holds a special meaning to me. I'd like to claim it as my own."

While Mike and El stepped away from the table for a few minutes, the trio consulted in hushed tones. Mike was confident their decision would come down in his favor, none of his requests unreasonable, and far less than he could have asked had he taken his equipment to any major corporation or government. El couldn't help but plant a quick kiss to his cheek in appreciation of the sweet sentiment he had admitted to the group.

"We've discussed it," Grace began, calling the pair back over, "and agree your proposal is more than fair. In the fall, we will select a team to take over your work, and we will need you to work with them for a period of time to hand off all of this. And, of course, you will be more than welcome to take on a class or two if you decide you miss teaching," she added with a smirk. "Beyond that, enjoy your retirement, professor emeritus Wheeler."

AN:

First, a huge thanks to those of you who have stuck around through my month absence. Working on something entirely my own has been...enlightening maybe? I've made enough progress to know I want to continue, though it is an entirely different beast from the writing I have been used to.

Second, Mike's decision. I've been wrestling with this chapter since, probably, March. I've sketched it out both this way, and with Mike torching it all. My reasoning is pretty much the way Mike laid it out. There are positive uses of what he created, but it can also be used in dangerous ways if it isn't respected. Really, S3 helped highlight this (I'll try not to pat my own back here..haha) I don't know if Mike passing off control of the whole thing is a cop-out, but it feels like putting it into more hands leaves it in a safer place. And it secured Mike and El's future to do pretty much whatever they would like.

Alright, onward and upward, and once again, Thanks!